

HISTORICAL
NOVEL

Vassili
YAN

JENGHIZ KHAN



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鐵木真



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YAN

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A Novel

Translated by Linda Noble



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Request to Readers

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vassily Yan (Yanchevetsky) was born in Kiev in 1875. His father was a teacher and translator of classical Greek literature. On his mother's side he came from an old line of Zaporozhye Cossacks. One of his ancestors fought in the battle at Kunersdorf in 1759, for which he was awarded a silver medal bearing the inscription, "For the victory over the Prussians." The medal was handed down through the generations to the eldest in the clan.

Having been graduated by the department of history and language of St. Petersburg University, Yan set out on foot with a knapsack on his back through the northern and central regions of Russia. Two years of wandering from village to village, through hunting and fishing settlements, along the Dnieper with raftsmen, etc. gave Yan a sound knowledge of the customs and language of his people. Yan submitted records of his travels to newspapers and lived off the meagre royalties they drew.

In 1901 Yan crossed the Kara-Kum Desert astride a Turkmen stallion and visited Khiva and Bukhara. From there he set out for Persia, passing through Seistan and Baluchistan along the Afghan border, finally reaching the territory of India.

Here, on the boundless trails of Asia, where to this day there remain traces of the huge and rapacious armies of Alexander the Great, Jenghiz Khan, Tamerlane, Babur and other Eastern conquerors that once crossed them, Yan was first inspired by the idea to write about the "great shadows of Asia".

The news that Japanese destroyers had attacked Russian vessels in Port Arthur reached Yan in Baluchistan. It was not long before Yan was in Manchuria as a special correspondent for the St. Petersburg Telegraph Agency at the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief. Here he was to witness first-hand the courage, endurance and patience of the Russian soldiers in battle.

With the end of World War I Yan returned to Central Asia, visited Persia once more, then worked for several years as a special correspondent for the same telegraph agency in Constantinople and the Balkans. Yan's first stories about life in the East were written at this time.

In the spring of 1918 Yan returned home. Russia was witnessing the onset of the trying post-revolution years and desperately needed educated people in all areas. Yan refused no work: lecturer, schoolteacher, newspaper and magazine editor, economist, playwright and director of a new revolutionary theater — Yan gave his all to every one of these professions.

In 1923 Yan moved to Moscow, where he devoted himself whole-heartedly to the writing that was to characterize the third and final period of his life — fiction based primarily on historical themes. His works were published in rapid succession: *The Phoenician Ship*, *Spartacus*, *Robert Fulton*, *Hammermen of the Urals*, and *Fires on the Barrows* (about Alexander the Great's invasion of Central Asia).

The novel *Jenghiz Khan* appeared in 1939, followed in 1941 by its sequel *Batu*. The author called the final book of the historical trilogy *The Golden Horde and Prince Alexander*.

Reader, *Salam*!¹

“A falcon in the sky is powerless without wings. A man on earth is helpless without a steed.

“All that happens has its reason, the beginning of the rope entails its end. A correctly chosen path across the deserts of the universe will lead the wanderer to his projected goal, while error and light-heartedness will draw him to the salt-marsh of death.

“If a man happens to witness something extraordinary: the eruption of a fire-breathing mountain that destroys flourishing settlements, the uprising of an oppressed nation against an almighty ruler, or an invasion of his native lands by a strange, barbarian tribe – all this the witness must impart to paper. And if he is unlearned in the art of threading together the words of a tale with the tip of a reed pen, then he must tell his recollections to an experienced scribe, that the latter might scrawl the words upon sturdy pages for the edification of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

“The man who has experienced astonishing events and kept quiet about them is like a miser who, having wrapped his valuables in a cloak, buries them in a deserted place while the cold hand of death is already upon his head.

“However, having sharpened my reed pen and dipped it in ink, I hesitate in indecision... Will I have enough words and strength to create a trustworthy account of that merciless destroyer of peoples Jenghiz Khan and his ruthless army?.. Audacious was the invasion of those savages from the northern steppes, when at the head of the army rode their red-bearded leader, when furious warriors sped through the tranquil valleys of *Mavera-un-Nahr* and *Khorezm*², leaving on the roads behind them thousands of mangled corpses, when every instant gave

¹*Salam* – greetings. This kind of address to the reader is typical of Eastern authors of the pre-Mongol period.

²*Mavera-un-Nahr* – the area between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. The name “Turkestan” was unknown at the time. Khorezm – ancient Central Asian state in the lowlands of the Amu Darya. In the 8th century Khorezm held the enormous territory from the Aral Sea to the Persian Gulf. It fell to Jenghiz Khan in 1221.

birth to new horrors and people asked one another, 'Will the heavens, shrouded in the smoke of burning villages, ever shine anew, or is the end of the world upon us?..'

"Many sought to persuade me to put into writing all that I knew and had heard of Jenghiz Khan and the Mongol invasion. I wavered at length... Now I have reached the conclusion that there is no benefit in my silence and I set forth to present an account of this great tragedy, the likes of which have not been seen on this earth by day or night and which swept down upon all mankind, and especially upon the peaceful toilers of your fields, Khorezm, tormented by misfortunes...

"Here my speech comes to an end, that it might not run too far ahead. Aged people will confirm that everything described by me indeed took place.

"The patient and persistent will see a favorable end of a deed begun, the seeker of knowledge will find it..."

BOOK ONE

ALL IS WELL IN THE GREAT KHOREZM

Part One

IN THE CLOAK OF A DERVISH

Chapter One

THE GOLDEN FALCON

Our inhabited earth is like a faded old cloak spread out flat. It is an island washed on all sides by a boundless ocean.

From an ancient Arab textbook

Early in spring a belated snowstorm swept across the lifeless sand-hills of the great Kara-Kum Desert¹. The wind whipped savagely at the few twisted bushes that had pushed through the sand. White snowflakes swirled above the ground. A dozen camels huddled together in a disorderly bunch near a clay hut with a dome-shaped roof. Where were the caravan's escorts? Why had the cameleers not removed the heavy packs and laid them in rows on the ground?

The camels raised their shaggy heads all plastered with snow; their mournful sobs merged with the howling of the wind. A bell tinkled in the distance... The camels turned their heads toward the sound. A black donkey came into sight. Behind it, gripping its tail, trudged a

¹At that time the Kara-Kum was a rather vast desert territory in Central Asia partly taken up by sand-covered steppes devoid of rivers and streams. — *Ed.*

bearded man in a long cloak, the tall cap of a dervish¹ and the white band of a pilgrim who has been to Mecca².

"Keep moving! Just a few more steps and you shall have your share of straw. Look, my faithful friend Bekir, who we have met! Where camels stand, there their masters rest, and the servants have already made a campfire. And where ten men have gathered round a campfire, surely a handful of boiled rice can be spared for an eleventh. Is that not right? Hey, who's there? True believers³, answer me!"

No one responded. The cracked bell on the lead camel's neck clanked dully.

Driving his donkey, the snow-spattered traveler walked slowly around the structure with its low clay wall. The intricately carved door was jammed, shut with a stake. Beyond the hut, on a small clearing surrounded by sandhills, lay rows of silent graves, meticulously marked with black and white pebbles.

"The dervish Haji⁴ Rakhim al-Bagdadi greets you, honorable inhabitants of this quiet valley who lie in eternal slumber!" the traveler mumbled as he hitched his donkey beneath a cane awning. "Where is the watchman of this quiet gathering? Perhaps he is inside the hut?"

The dervish crumbled some bread into a colorful sack and tied it to the donkey's head.

"I give to you, my faithful friend, all that is left of our food. You need it more than I. If we do not freeze in the night, tomorrow you will carry me on further. And I shall warm myself with recollections of how hot we were beneath the palms of heavenly Arabia."

The dervish kicked the stake aside and opened the door. At the center of the hut, where a fire usually smouldered, extinguished coals lay buried in ash. The ceiling rose in a dome, capped at the top with a smoke outlet. Four men squatted by the wall.

"Peace, prosperity and broad vistas!" said the dervish. They made no reply. He took a step forward. The muted

¹*Dervish* (Turk, lit., beggar) — a member of any of various Muslim orders, dedicated to a life of poverty and chastity.

²Birthplace of Muhammad and hence a holy city of Islam, to which Muslims make pilgrimages.

³*True believers* — i. e., fellow Muslims. — *Tr.*

⁴A Muslim who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca; a title of honor.

stillness and pallor of the squatting men made him back hastily to the door and slip out.

"Haji Rakhim, you mustn't complain. Four dead men await someone to swathe them in cerements. And though you are poor and hungry, you are still strong and can roam the endless roads of the universe... Here is a whole caravan that has lost its master. Were I only to want it I could become the owner of these camels, loaded down with riches. But a seeker of truth, a dervish, needs nothing. He shall remain a poor man and continue on his way, singing songs. However, the poor beasts must be pitied."

The dervish disentangled the camels' tethers, brought the animals together side by side and pulled them down to their knees. Among the packs he found a sack of barley and sprinkled a few handfuls before each camel.

"If anyone were ever to ask whether Haji Rakhim had done a good deed in his lifetime, these camels could reply in unison, 'The dervish fed us during a cold blizzard, and because of it we did not freeze.' "

The dervish passed the whole night on a bundle of reeds, his back pressed to the donkey, who dozed quietly, its legs tucked up. Come morning, the wind had scattered the clouds and the sun appeared in the east.

Upon seeing the pink rays creeping among the graves, the dervish scrambled to his feet.

"Come along, Bekir, let us resume our journey!"

Having loaded his donkey with the sack of what remained of the barley, the dervish glanced inside the hut. Instead of four men squatting by the wall, there remained now but one. His unblinking brown eyes stared dully.

"But where are the other dead men? Surely they have not lain down in their graves? No, Haji Rakhim does not wish to remain here; he will go on to the cities of Khorezm where there are many cheerful people, where the words of wise men pour forth, fresh like milk and honey."

"Help me, true believer!" a raspy voice whispered. The squatting man's wavy beard stirred.

"Who are you?"

"Mahmud..."

"Are you from Khorezm?"

"I have the golden falcon..."

"Aye-yea!" the dervish was taken aback. "Dying, a true believer thinks of his golden falcon! Drink some water!"

The ailing man took a few sips from a gourd. His feverish eyes stopped on the dervish.

"I was seriously wounded... bandits of Kara-Konchar¹... My three companions awaited a bitter end — someone had shut the door fast and we could not get out... If you, true believer, abandon another true believer in distress, it is worse than murder — so it was written in the Noble Book²...

His teeth chattered feverishly, his hand went out to the dervish in supplication and fell back down limply. The wounded man toppled over on his side.

Haji Rakhim opened the man's woolen clothes. Blood oozed from a dark wound on his chest.

"We must stop the bleeding. What might I dress his wound with?"

Nearby lay a thick, skillfully wound turban. The dervish set about unraveling it.

From out of the turban's thin muslin folds fell a gold, oval-shaped plate. The dervish picked it up. It bore the delicately chiseled image of a falcon with outspread wings and an inscription in strange letters that looked like ants scurrying along a trail.

The dervish grew thoughtful and looked more closely at the man.

"This man bears the fiery reflections of great events to come. Herein lies the secret of the revived dead man," murmured the dervish. "It's the *paitza*³ of the great Tatar kagan⁴. This golden falcon must be safeguarded; I shall give it to the wounded man once his strength and reason have returned to him." And the dervish tucked the gold plate away in the folds of his wide belt.

He fussed with the man at length before he finally

¹*Kara-Konchar* — black sword.

²*Noble Book* — the Koran.

³*Paitza* — a metal or wooden plate inscribed with the command of Jenghiz Khan; the *paitza* authorized its bearer to pass unhindered in Mongol territories. The *paitza* provided major privileges: local authorities were obliged to render assistance, provide horses, guides and food supplies to all bearers.

⁴*Kagan* — the title of the sovereign of the Mongols and the Tatars.

"*Salam!* Have you any barley? I shall pay double the price."

"In the desert grain is worth more than money. But for a rare guest such as you everything desired will be found. Your horse will be fed choice wheat instead of barley..."

From a nearby yurt came the sound of a hand mill-stone on which women were grinding wheat.

"Aye-yea, you there! Come fetch the horse!"

Two girls in full-length dark-red gowns, silver ornaments and coins tinkling on their chests, came running out of the yurt, covering their faces with the tips of diaphanous cloths tossed over their heads. They took the reins from either side and led the horse away.

The khan went inside the yurt. It was warm there. A fire of resinous roots smoked in the center. On a thick felt mat by the wall a man lay on his back. The grey pallor of the black-bearded face and the hands folded on the chest spoke of imminent death. His labored breathing showed that life was fighting desperately within that spent body.

At the wounded man's feet sat a bearded dervish in a high cap with a white band — the sign of a haji. Draped over his half-naked body was a broad cloak with a multitude of bright patches.

"*Salam aleikum!*" said Jelal ed-Din and lowered himself to the felt mat beside the wounded man. A slave woman shrouded to her eyes crept forth and pulled off the khan's soaked green boots. Jelal ed-Din unfastened his leather belt with its curved sabre and laid it down beside him.

"Who are you?" he asked the dervish. "Judging by your garb, you have seen distant lands."

"I roam the earth searching for islands of truth amidst a sea of falsehood..."

"Where is your homeland and where are you going?"

"I am called Haji Rakhim, though I was also given the name Bagdadi, as I studied in Bagdad. The most perfect, gracious and knowledgeable people served as my teachers... I learned many sciences, read many legends of the Arabs, Turks and Persians and those written in the ancient language of Pehlevi¹. However, but regret and the weight of

¹An Iranian language spoken and written in Persia from about the 3rd to the 8th centuries A. D.

sins, I see no other trace of my youthful days...”

Jelal ed-Din raised his eyebrows incredulously.

“Just where are you going and why?”

“I roam this flat platter of earth which lies amid five seas, I visit cities, oases and deserts in search of people scorched by the fire of irrepressible ambitions. I want to see the extraordinary and bow down before true heroes and the righteous. Now I am on my way to Gurganj, rumored to be the finest and richest city of Khorezm and the whole world, where they tell me I shall find wise men who radiate knowledge and the most skilled of craftsmen who have adorned the city with samples of great art...”

“You search for heroes who have recorded their feats with the tip of a sword on the fields of battle?” said Jelal ed-Din and pondered this thought. “Will you succeed in describing the feats of a hero with such blazing lines that young men and women will sing your songs and courageous jigits will repeat them as they charge into battle, or old men as they take their final step toward the grave?”

The dervish replied in verse:

*Though splendid and glorious is Rudegi's¹ song,
I know no fewer magnificent words.
Blind, with verse he conquered the world,
While I sing for companions of the desert campfire...*

Their host dragged the gazelle the khan had killed into the yurt. It had already been skinned and gutted.

“Allow me to give the women part of the meat, that they might prepare it for your supper?”

“Partake one and all! Let everyone sup!” replied Jelal ed-Din. “I am not a bek's huntsman. I myself am a bek and the son of a bek; I am not obliged to turn my catch over to a master...” He drew a slender dagger from its sheath, cut a few thin chunks of meat from the gazelle's back and, piercing them with a stick, set about roasting them over the coals of the fire.

Their host gave the gazelle carcass to the women and took a seat beside the khan. Stroking his beard, he began

¹*Rudegi* — a major 9th-century Persian-language poet, native of the city of Bukhara.

asking questions of courtesy, "Are you well? Are you strong? Have you warmed yourself? Are your parents well?"

The khan, in keeping with tradition, also posed a few polite questions, then said, "Let my words not be perceived as insult: whose tent is this and where am I?"

"My yurt is one day's journey from the great caravan route to the city of Nessa¹, and I am a simple nomad, forsaken in the great steppe, who is known by all as Korkud-Choban²."

The dog, which had been growling outside the yurt, suddenly began barking furiously. Shrieks and sobbing could be heard from without. The thudding of horse hooves drew near, then stopped short. A powerful voice hollered, "Who is in the yurt? Answer me, Korkud-Choban!"

Chapter Three

JIGIT OF THE STEPPE

The old man rose and went out. The words of the exchange could barely be heard.

"Why has he come here?" the horseman asked in a hoarse whisper. "Or is the hour of death upon him?"

"All three are my guests."

"I shall show you what sentence of Allah's is written on their pale brows..."

"You will not dare to touch them. And these five new slaves of yours — where are they from?"

"These are experienced craftsmen. Coppersmiths and armorers. They were traveling with the caravan. I wanted to 'trim the beards' of the caravan, but Shaitan brought from somewhere two hundred jigits, driving gazelles for some highborn bek. I was forced to abandon the camels, the cameleers ran off and I chased down these five alone. Now I am sending them on to Merv where I shall catch a

¹*Nessa* — once a powerful fortress near present-day Ashkhabad, later destroyed by the Mongols and buried in the sand. Its ruins were discovered in 1931.

²*Korkud-Choban* — Korkud the shepherd.

fine price for them."

"May Allah help you in this!"

The host re-entered the yurt with his new guest.

The stranger was young and tall, with square shoulders and a very slim waist. In a green morocco sheath at his side hung a long *konchar* sword. Yellow boots of camel suede on high narrow heels, a tall, round sheepskin hat and a black *chapan*¹ of a particular cut distinguished him as a Turkmen. This was confirmed by a swarthy, determined face and pronounced cheekbones.

"Come up to the fire, sit down!" their host offered.

The guest, however, did not take a seat on the mat, but continued to stand near the entrance. His eyes grew wide and round like an owl's.

"Who are you?" asked Jelal ed-Din without raising his eyes.

"A steppe dweller..."

"Do you roam from place to place with your livestock or do you earn your living in another way?"

"I trim the beards of caravan merchants..."

Such an answer, according to the customs of the steppe, was discourteous. Upon meeting strangers, even poorly dressed ones, by the campfire, all became equal, exchanging questions of courtesy: about one's health, the state of the herd, the distance of the journey. The Turkmen was clearly looking for trouble.

Jelal ed-Din glanced up, then lowered his eyes again, and only the corner of his mouth twitched slightly. What high-born bek would deign to enter into argument with a simple nomad?

"Our host has told me you are seeking the road to Gurganj? I can escort you there," said the Turkmen after a pause.

Jelal ed-Din was brave, but his horse was spent. Here he was safe, protected by the law of hospitality. But on the road that Turkmen would hunt him, just as he himself had recently hunted the gazelle. So the khan replied, "I am not going to Gurganj just now."

"And who is this man who moans as he takes leave of our sorrowful world?"

"He was wounded by bandits," said the dervish. "No

¹*Chapan* — caftan-like outer garment.

doubt it was the work of the reckless Kara-Konchar. They say that leopard of the desert spares no one."

"And do you think that others have not robbed Kara-Konchar?"

The dervish replied, "What might think I, a hollow nutshell, tossed about the steppe by the winds of wandering?!"

"Kara-Konchar lives in a deserted and inaccessible saltmarsh. He is as elusive as a lizard that burrows in the sand, or a snake that slithers among the reeds. No one can reach him, but he can penetrate everywhere."

"He who makes a living of robbery prepares for himself a glorious end: his head will rise above all others, impaled in the wall of Gurganj," said Jelal ed-Din indifferently, rotating the stick with the roasting meat.

"Kara-Konchar is a night shadow chasing the miscreant," the Turkmen went on. "Kara-Konchar is the dagger of vengeance, the spear of anger and the sword of retribution. Kara-Konchar is alone now, he has neither son nor brother. The day will come when he will drop dead and the place where his yurt stands will be vacant. Is this good?"

"That is lamentable," said Jelal ed-Din.

"Kara-Konchar once had a grey-bearded father and courageous brothers and gentle sisters. But when the Shah Muhammad requires a hundred horses, he rides into our camps with his Kipchak warriors and takes not one hundred horses but three hundred of the choicest stallions. And he strips the women of their silver ornaments, saying that he does so in punishment for the fact that some nomads somewhere robbed an arrogant Kipchak khan. And while the shah has three hundred wives in his palace, he and his Kipchak men carry off our finest maiden Gyul-Jamal, over whom a hundred jigits fought, and holds her captive in his palace, calling her his three hundred and first wife. Is this good?"

"This too is lamentable," Jelal ed-Din said calmly. "But the fact that one hundred jigits allowed the finest maiden to be carried off and could not retrieve her — now, this is not good."

"Our jigits were not in camp at the time. The Kipchak men are sly — they time their visits well."

"Tell me this, jigit," said Jelal ed-Din. "You say you

had a father, brothers and sisters? Why is it that they are no more?"

"The shah's executioners seized my grey-bearded father and in the square of Gurganj they hacked him slowly to pieces, beginning with the soles of his feet. My brothers fled to the east and the west. The Kipchak horsemen seized my sisters and carried them away. Surely this is not good?"

"This too is lamentable," said Jelal ed-Din.

"Where now am I to wander beneath the sun? What have I left to do?"

Jelal ed-Din went on heatedly, "If the bright sabre in your hands flashes in defense of your native tribe, if besides amusement on the caravan trails you seek to accomplish a feat of valor and become the champion of our green banner¹, then come to me in Gurganj and I shall teach you how to make a glorious name for yourself."

"Listen, bek jigit," replied the Turkmen, fiercely wiping his lips on his sleeve. "When I come to Gurganj, the shah's spies will come after me like jackals, and I shall not surrender to them, but die in combat. Is this good?"

"This will not be," said Jelal ed-Din. "As you approach the West Gates of Gurganj, you will see a garden with tall poplars. Ask the gate-keepers, 'Is this the new palace and the Tillyaly garden? Take me to its master!' And you will present this paper."

From the folds of his saffron turban Jelal ed-Din produced a sheet of paper and removed a gold signet-ring from his thumb. He blackened the signet with the smoke from a burning branch and, dampening the corner of the paper with saliva, he applied the signet. A name, written in a beautiful ligature, was printed in soot on the paper. He rolled the paper into a tube, folded it in half, smoothed it flat on his knee and handed it to the Turkmen. The latter touched the paper to his lips and his brow and tucked it away in a copper tinder box hanging from his belt.

"I trust your word, bek jigit, and I shall come. *Salam!*" With that the Turkmen disappeared behind the curtain at the entrance.

Their host followed him silently. Before the yurt,

¹Green banner — the symbol of Islam. — Tr.

where a large copper pot was boiling over a fire, on earth wet from the melting snow sat the five emaciated slaves in tattered rags. Their hands were bound behind their backs, their necks were in nooses, the ends of which were tied to a horsehair lasso. Beside the slaves stood a tall bay horse with a silver collar around its curved neck and a tether fastened tautly to a bow. The end of the lasso that held the prisoners was wound round the bow.

The Turkmen mounted the horse.

"On your feet, you infidel swine! If you don't keep moving I'll chop you up and leave you on the road as carrion."

The five slaves rose and began hobbling one after another. The Turkmen cracked his whip and soon they all disappeared behind a hill. The host re-entered the yurt.

"Honorable guest of mine, some one hundred jigits have appeared in the distance and are heading this way."

"I know, these are the Khorezm Shah's jigits searching for me. And who is this man with whom I was speaking?"

"That," and their host went on in a low whisper, as if fearing the Turkmen might return, "is the leopard of the Kara-Kum, the terror of the caravan trails, the famous Kara-Konchar, may Allah judge him!"

Chapter Four

THE UNERRING DECISION-MAKER

Following his respite with the nomads, Haji Rakhim proceeded along a narrow path through the desert for two days, heading north toward an oasis in the lower reaches of the Jaihun¹, where the cities and villages of the multitudinous Khorezm could be found. The donkey trudged along slowly, followed by the even strides of the camel with the wounded merchant who had not yet regained consciousness. The dervish sang Arab and Persian songs and gazed into the distance, waiting for the colorful domes of Khorezm's mosques to finally appear.

On the third day the narrow path amidst the sand-hills turned into a wide road and climbed to the top of a

¹*Jaihun* — the name of the Amu Darya River in the 13th century.

rocky height. From there a valley opened up, all abloom and covered with orchards, groves and patches of green fields. Scattered everywhere among the trees were little houses with flat roofs, clusters of black, smoke-stained yurts and the fortress-like estates of wealthy Kipchak khans with turrets at the corners. Here and there minarets pointed upwards like spears, and alongside them the multicolored tiles of the mosques' cupolas sparkled iridescently. Squares of flooded plowland shone like enormous mirrors dotted with half-naked men in rags with shackles on their legs.

The dervish stopped on the hillcrest.

"Here is the land that was created to become a paradise," he murmured, "but became instead a valley of anguish and tears. Fifteen years ago I fled from here, choking with fear, glancing back furtively like a criminal. Who would ever recognize in this black, sun-scorched dervish the youth who was cursed by the supreme imam¹ himself? Move along, Bekir, soon we shall pass the night at the gates of the capital of all capitals, the richest of all the world's cities, Gurganj, where the Khorezm Shah Muhammad reigns, the mightiest but most sinister of all Muslim rulers..."

The dervish started off again. Along the road he began to meet with greater frequency two-wheeled carts pulled by massive, long-horned oxen, foot travelers, dashing horsemen on decorated steeds and sun-scorched villagers on scrawny donkeys; from all directions came the lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, the cries of drivers.

In the very first village the dervish was encircled by men with long white staffs.

"What kind of a man are you? If you are an ascetic dervish, then why do you have with you a camel? Come with us to the khakim², he will read you your death sentence."

They led the dervish into a courtyard surrounded by a high clay wall. On the terrace, laid with a broad rug, a thin, stiff-backed old man in a striped robe sat cross-

¹*Imam* — the officiating priest of a mosque; the title borne by a Muslim religious leader or chief.

²*Khakim* — the ruler of a district. The original meaning is that of a scholar and lawyer.

legged. His enormous snow-white turban, carefully combed grey beard, stern, penetrating gaze and slowness of movement inspired awe in all who approached him, and they would prostrate themselves before him. A young scribe sat hunched over beside him awaiting commands with a reed pen in hand.

"Who are you?" asked the khakim.

"I am the sinful son of my honorable mother and I go by the name of Haji Rakhim al-Bagdadi, pupil of the holy Bagdad sheiks. I travel long roads searching in vain for the torches lit by the righteous sages whose bodies are concealed by the chilly darkness of the grave."

The old man raised his eyebrows suspiciously and stared at the dervish.

"And who is the ailing man on the camel? Why does he have no turban? Is he a true believing Muslim or an infidel? I am told you wounded him, robbed him and sold his possessions. Is this true?"

The dervish raised his hands to the sky.

"You, the all-seeing sky, are my sole defender! I marvel at the gossip, who breathes nothing but slanderous rumors! What does he care of my labors and sorrows!"

The khakim held up his index finger significantly and whispered, "Tell me in truth what you know of this man."

Then the dervish told him of his encounter with the plundered caravan and of his efforts to save the wounded man's life.

The old man stroked his silvery beard and said, "Perhaps this is a great man whose hand reaches to the very sun? I will have a look at him for myself." Slipping his bare feet into shoes, he descended from the terrace and walked over to the camel. He was surrounded by people of the village, each attempting to outshout the next.

"We know this ailing man. He is the wealthy merchant from Gurganj Mahmud-Yalvach. Yes, and there is his brand on the camel. Mahmud-Yalvach's caravans of two and three hundred camels travel to Tabriz and Bulgar¹ and to the holy city of Bagdad."

Having heard the villagers out, the khakim remained

¹*Tabriz* — a large city in NW Iran. *Bulgar* — a wealthy trade city in the 10th-15th centuries, the capital of the Volga Bulgars, located at the confluence of the Kama and Volga rivers.

silent, working his lips for a moment, then announced his decision, and the scribe recorded it.

"Inasmuch as knowledgeable and trustworthy people declare that the ailing man is none other than the most distinguished merchant Mahmud-Yalvach of Gurganj, I order that he be carefully removed from the camel and laid up in my house, to which a healer should be summoned to treat him diligently with medical herbs. The dervish, who has done a good deed in caring for the wounded Muslim, may go on his way, and the rescued merchant is to reward him. Inasmuch as the camel may not belong to the dervish, it will remain in my care until its master has recovered. For the proclamation of the judicial sentence and the application of the seal the black donkey which belonged to the dervish shall be left in my custody."

"Has everything been recorded?" the khakim turned to the scribe.

The latter whispered, "Verily my lord has spoken!"

The khakim added, "Scholarly dervish, take one dirham from my meagre resources."

Haji Rakhim took the copper coin, drew it across his forehead and pressed it to his lips. Holding it in his clenched fist he said, "Your wisdom is great, oh khakim, unerring decision-maker. You have freed me of caring for the wounded man, the camel and the donkey, upon which I shall no longer travel, but whom I shall no longer have to feed. I, the most contemptible of the forsaken, resemble the light-weight coin that slips from the doner's generous hand into the blind man's cup. And if your generosity is as pure as the silver of your beard, this copper dirham will turn into a gold dinar."

Haji Rakhim opened his hand. On his palm glittered a gold coin — a dinar.

"Verily I say to you, honorable ruler, that the land upon which your foot steps will never see a bad harvest."

Haji Rakhim closed his fist again and stood motionless. The ruler and all the onlookers glanced mutely at one another and at the dervish's clenched fist, their mouths agape.

"I gave him a black copper dirham. I remember it well. But all of you just saw in his hand a gold dinar," said the khakim. And with agility no one would have expected

from the ever pompous old man, the khakim lunged at the dervish and caught hold of his hand.

"Give me that gold dinar! You must pay the judicial expenses with it!"

Haji Rakhim opened his fist and the ruler snatched up the coin, it was once again but a copper dirham. The pompous khakim turned away and grandly ascended to the terrace.

Haji Rakhim walked over to the donkey, took his sack, threw it over his shoulder and, without looking back, continued on toward Gurganj, shouting at the top of his voice the call of the dervishes, "*Ya-gu-u! Ya-hak! La illahi illahu-u!*"¹

Chapter Five

THE HIDDEN GATE

"All is just as it was many years ago," thought Haji Rakhim, leaning against a tall clay wall in a deserted alley of Gurganj. "The same flat-roofed houses among apricot and mulberry trees, the same white doves soaring in flocks across the turquoise sky, and above them, higher still, the brown hawks circle slowly... The same white branches of the blooming acacia hang over the wall, concealing the same little gate. The circles of an intricately carved design are still visible on its weathered grey boards. A girl in a pink dress and an orange shawl used to come out through this gate. Where is she now? What has become of her?"

The gate opened and out stepped an adolescent girl in long pink garb with a saffron shawl. She held a shovel in her hand. Her prominent cheekbones and slightly slanted eyes, the cut of her dress and the knot of the saffron shawl would tell anyone in the know that she was from a Turkic tribe. Humming a tune, she cleared the drainage ditch into her orchard, and the water turned to pass through an opening under the clay wall.

The girl suddenly stood up straight, and shading her

¹This traditional Arabic call of the dervishes means, "Yes, He is just, there is no other Allah but Him."

eyes with her olive-skinned hand, she looked toward the far end of the alley.

Someone there was singing in a high, modulating voice:

*Night falls and slumber quits my eyes,
I gaze until dawn at the star-spattered skies.
When the new crescent moon I chance to see,
Her curving brows I do recall.
Is this my fate? Is this my destiny?
Oh, would I to know what will befall!..*

A young horseman in a dark-green *chekmen*¹, drawn tightly at the waist with a bright-colored belt came into sight at the far end of the alley. His sheepskin cap pulled down over his right brow, he rode slowly astride a prancing dark bay stallion. The horseman whipped his steed and broke into a gallop. When he was even with the girl he suddenly reined in the horse.

The girl dropped the shovel and dashed into the yard, slamming the gate. The horseman pushed his cap back on his head and continued slowly down the alley.

The gate opened a crack and the girl peered out. Looking around timidly, she retrieved the shovel and disappeared again.

Blackened by the sun, in a multicolored robe and a pointed cap with the white band of a haji, the bearded dervish crossed the road, thumping his long staff loudly like a blind man. Glancing around, he carefully removed a scrap of pink material which had caught on the gate and tucked it away in his bosom.

"Yes," he mumbled, "everything here is just as it was before: the same tree, only taller and thicker; the same gate, merely faded and crooked... And the girl resembles the one I loved at sixteen, but it is not she. Where is the one who stood here so many years ago with a basket of apricots, dark and sweet like an apricot herself?! Everything is just the same — even the hawks are still circling over the old tower as they did before. Only Haji Rakhim is not the same..."

The dervish knocked on the gate with his staff. From behind the old elm door came the cough of an aged

¹*Chekmen* — an ornate caftan.

person. In the doorway appeared an old man, withered and bent, wearing a snow-white turban.

"*Ya-gu-u! Ya-hak!*" cried the dervish.

The old man, staring with rheumy eyes, fumbled in the folds of his sash and pulled out a worn leather purse. He dug in the purse with bloodless, waxy fingers and elicited a small black coin.

"*Allahum sella*¹!" the dervish exclaimed, pressing the coin to his brow and lips. "Who lives in this home? For whom may I raise my prayer to the one and only?"

"I live in this home, though it belongs not to me but to the smith Kary-Maksum. At the central bazaar everyone knows the expansive smithy and Kary-Maksum's armory shop. He is generous in his charity to servants of the faith."

"And what name has fortune granted you, worker of miracles?"

"Do not address me with such a lofty title as 'worker of miracles'. I am Mirza-Yusuf², an old chronicler in the service of the shah, and I may add only in the verse of a poet:

*I have lived my life like a beast of burden,
I am a slave to my children, a captive of my family.
On one hand I can count all that I possess, —
My wretched home and one hundred thousand woes!
And of escaping woe there is no hope!..*"³

"No, no! You are indeed a worker of miracles," said the dervish. "You have sacrificed a black dirham, and because your charity was inspired by a noble impulse of the heart, the dirham turned at once into a genuine dinar of pure gold."

The old man bent over the dervish's dark, bird-like palm, upon which lay a gold dinar with a raised inscription.

"In all my long life I have never witnessed the miracles

¹*Allahum sella* — a Muslim greeting.

²*Mirza* — a title of honor placed after the name of a royal prince or before the name of a high official, scholar, etc.

³From a poem of Kesai (9th century).

spoken of in the holy books. Either you, dervish, are capable of working miracles, or, like a trickster at the bazaar, you wish to laugh at a half-blind old man."

"But you may test this dinar for yourself. Send your servant to the bazaar, and he will bring you a whole basket of roasted kebab, boiled noodles, honey and sweet melon. Perhaps then you will even share of that plentitude with a poor traveler who has come here straight from faraway Bagdad?"

"So you have come from the famed city of Bagdad? In that case, come into my home and tell me what you have seen there, and I shall test the strength of your incredible dinar."

Chapter Six

THE SHAH'S CHRONICLER

...He set out to me despite the vast distance between our homes, the long way and the horrors of the journey.

Ibn-Hazm, 11th century

Shuffling in his yellow suede boots, the old man started across the yard and stepped up onto the terrace.

"Follow me, traveler!"

The dervish followed the old man into a room with a floor of brick and narrow rugs laid out along the walls. On the shelves in a niche stood two silver pitchers and an Iraqi glass vase. The room's tent-like ceiling, skillfully made up of criss-crossed, brightly painted logs, had an outlet at the top for smoke. In a recession at the center of the room a brazier with coals smouldered. Three iron-forged trunks stood open along the back wall, revealing large books bound in yellow leather inside.

The dervish set his staff and some other of his things by the door. Slipping out of his shoes, he walked over to the old man, kneeled down and sat back on his heels.

"Bent-Zankija!" cried the old man in a quavering voice.

In walked a boy in a floor-length striped robe and a blue turban. Folding his hands on his stomach, he bowed, awaiting his orders.

"Take this gold dinar. Give it to old Saklab and explain to him as follows: Go, old Saklab, to the bazaar, to the row where the Indian money-changers sit before boxes of gold and silver coins. These money-changers sell tops and dice for games. Choose the man with the greyest of beards and ask him to appraise this coin: is it a genuine full-fledged gold dinar or not? If the Indian money-changer says there is no deception in the dinar, have him make change of silver dirhams. Once he has received the silver, have Saklab go to the row where travelers can take pleasure in food and buy that which this honorable seeker of truth will list for you now."

"What should the servant buy?" the boy asked the dervish.

The latter looked at the boy. The gentle features of his face seemed strangely familiar. Where had he seen him? The dervish said, "Have the servant take a basket and buy everything he would buy for a brother he had not seen for many years. Let the servant choose for himself."

The old man beckoned to the boy and whispered in his ear, "Tell Saklab that upon returning from the bazaar he is not to come in here like the ragamuffin he usually is, but should first put on my old robe. Once you have given him the dinar, come back here, bringing with you an inkpot with a reed pen and paper. You shall record his speech."

The boy disappeared and returned presently with paper and writing instruments.

"First, tell me your name, traveler, where you are from and how you came to be in the famed Bagdad."

"My name is Haji Rakhim al-Bagdadi. I come from a small village near Basra. I am willing to answer all your questions, but first allow me to touch upon something else which troubles my heart."

"Speak," said the old man.

"In Bagdad I studied at a large madrasah under the most famous of scholars. Among the students searching like myself for light among these torches of knowledge was one young man, always sullen and doleful, who distinguished himself by a passionate diligence. When I told him that I wanted to don the 'sash of wandering' and, taking up the 'staff of wayfaring', set out for the famed Gurganj, the noble Bukhara and the magnificent Samarkand, that youth appealed to me with these words:

'Haji Rakhim al-Bagdadi, if you chance to be in the wealthy city of the Khorezm shahs, Gurganj, go to the third street that crosses the main road from the bazaar to the West Gates, find the house of the smith and arms merchant Kary-Maksum and inquire as to whether or not my honorable parents are alive there. Tell them all I am doing in Bagdad. And when you return to Bagdad you shall recount everything you discovered about them to me.' I promised him this and set out on my journey. But the winds of the unforeseen and the storms of tribulations hurled me to various corners of the universe. I walked beneath the scorching rays of India's sun, crossed the faraway deserts of Tataria¹, reached the Great Wall which guards the kingdom of China from invasions by the Tatars; I visited the shore of the roaring ocean, made my way across the steep snowy mountains of the Tien Shan and everywhere I found Muslims². And so many years have passed until now, when I have finally reached Gurganj and this street which my Bagdadian friend indicated. I have found the house and the gate beneath the snow-white acacia tree, and at last I am conversing with you, worker of miracles, who, in all likelihood, recalls the youth who lived here in this yard and left Gurganj fifteen years ago?"

"How was the youth called?" the old man asked sternly.

"There, in the sublime palace of knowledge, he was called Abu-Jafar al-Khorezm."

"How dare you utter that name, miserable one!" the old scribe cried, foaming at the mouth. "Do you know that he was a great sinner? Despite his youthful years, he put himself and his parents to shame and very nearly plunged all his clan into an abyss of misery."

"But he was very young, was he not? What could he possibly have done? Did he kill someone or attack a high-born bek?"

"From an early age that dreadful Abu-Jafar, to the

¹*Tataria* — the name of the territory of present-day Mongolia and western China. It was inhabited by numerous nomadic tribes of Turkic origin, all bearing the common name of Tatars.

²The Sogdians and later their descendents the Tajiks, Muslims who came from Central Asia, excellent craftsmen and enterprising merchants, spread out along the great trade route from Central Asia to China, establishing trade and artisan settlements all along the way.

lament of us all, was marked by great capabilities and diligence. He studied together with other pupils under our finest scholars, trying to grasp at once reading, the beauty of fine penmanship and the profound meaning of the great Koran. He excelled at everything and began to have success at poetry writing, emulating Firdausi and Rudégi and Abu Said. However, his verse was not for the edification of others, but only for the temptation of the gullible..."

The old man went on in a whisper.

"That wretched youth began to indulge in free-thinking. He had the insolence to argue with the grey-bearded *ulems*¹ and imams, throwing into confusion the other simple-hearted listeners. At last, when an imam noted, 'The road you have taken leads not to heaven but to the fiery abyss of hell,' Abu-Jafar answered him audaciously, 'Be gone with you and do not summon me to heaven! When you preach about rosaries, places of prayer and abstinence, I think: Does it make any difference whether one goes to the mosque of Muhammad, or the monastery of Isa², where the bells ring, or the synagogue of Moses. I have searched everywhere but have not found God. There is no God — He was invented by those who trade in his name. My light, my leader is Abu Ali ibn Sina³. Then the holy imams cursed him and ordered him seized. They wanted to take him to the main square and cut out his venomous tongue and chop off his hands so that he might never again compose that depraving poetry of his. But with a serpent's cunning Abu-Jafar disappeared. At first it was thought that his father was hiding the wayward son out of pity. Therefore the Khorezm Shah Muhammad himself ordered the father seized, thrown into the infested dungeon and bound with a chain bearing the inscription, 'Forever unto death.' And if the father were to die, by the shah's order the near-

¹*Ulem* — a teacher in the Muslim theological school.

²*Isa* — Christ.

³*Abu Ali ibn Sina* (980-1037) — outstanding scholar of the 11th century, born in Bukhara. He is known by his European name of Avicenna. For his irreligion and calls for the liberation of reason he was thrown in prison in Isfahan, where he died. He left behind many books on natural sciences, medicine and alchemy, and is renowned in the Muslim East as one of the boldest fighters for the liberation of reason. His *Canon of Medicine* was translated into Latin and enjoyed particular influence in the Middle Ages.

est relation was to be imprisoned until Abu-Jafar gave himself up."

"And is the father in prison to this day?" the dervish asked softly. His wide eyes glistened and his face went grey like that of a dead man.

"The father died, unable to withstand the dank darkness and awful lice and tics in the dungeon. In accordance with the Khorezm Shah's order, the executioners seized his younger son Tugan, bound him in the same chains and threw him in the same dungeon."

"What a crime!" the dervish gasped.

"I am very sorry about the boy Tugan," the old man continued. "I went to great lengths in my care of him. Not wanting Tugan to follow in his corrupted brother's footsteps, I tried to enlighten him. I taught him reading and writing, but he was more drawn toward trades and military amusements, so I put him under the apprenticeship of the smith Kary-Maksum, who showed him how to make excellent weapons. Now the little orphan, Bent-Zankija, the daughter of a slave woman, has taken Tugan's place in my house. She proved very capable at reading, writing and memorizing various poems and songs. My eyes have begun to fade with the years, and now everything doubles before me — I see not one moon, but three at once. Bent-Zankija has become my helper, a scribe. She records my conversations and copies manuscripts. Here she is sitting before you with a reed pen in hand."

Only then did the dervish realize that the scribe in a blue turban was the very girl he had just seen go out through the gate with a shovel.

The dervish stared at her fixedly, then dropped his eyes, not daring to ask about the other girl he had seen in this very spot when he was sixteen years old. Driving away his agitation, the dervish exclaimed, "Are you not indeed a worker of miracles?! You have taught this girl the subtleties of reading and writing, after which she has the right to tie her turban in the knot that only mirzas wear. I see that in your home everything is imbued with concern for knowledge."

The old man folded his long slender hands and stared hard at the dervish.

"Now tell me about yourself: do you intend to continue your wandering for a long time to come?"

The dervish tossed his dishevelled head and peered at the old man with flaming black eyes.

"My father is the hunger that drove me across the desert. My mother is need, crying her eyes out with despair when she had no milk in her breasts for her newborn. My teacher is fear before the executioner's sword. But I hear a voice, 'Do not grieve, dervish, you have always done that of which you are worthy.' "

The old mirza shook his head.

"You are decorated with knowledge, and any judge or ruler in the district would eagerly take you on as a scribe. I too could take you on right now as a copier of manuscripts in the shah's library. The library holds rare manuscripts in single copies, the titles of which no one even knows, and they ought to be copied over so as not to perish for mankind. Why trudge the roads? Surely you are not drawn by wandering and dust and filth and rocks beneath your feet?"

The dervish said flatly, "I am asked, 'Why do you not adorn your shelter with bright carpets?' But 'when the invocatory call of the heroes has sounded, what do you do with the minstrel's song?' 'When the steed is charging into battle, how can I lie down amid the blooming roses?' "1

The old man held out his hands in utter bewilderment.

"What wars do you speak of? Who can threaten the magnificent sultan, the most powerful of Muslim sovereigns? The fires of alien battle camps will be lit only when he himself wants to fight..."

"A terrible fire moves from the east, and it will consume everything."

The old man shook his head.

"Oh, no! As long as the Khorezm Shah keeps his sword sheathed, all will be quiet in the valleys of Maveran-Nahr and on all the borders of the kingdom of Khorezm."

An old slave with a heavy chain around his ankles and fastened to his belt noiselessly entered the room. He carried a basket of assorted foods purchased with the miraculous dinar.

A short striped robe was thrown over the emaciated

¹From the poetry of Ibragim Monteser (10th century).

body of the tall old man. His long greying hair hung limply about his shoulders. Spreading a silk shawl on the floor, he set out flat bread, almond pies, cups of honey, pistachios, almonds, raisins, sugared melon slices and other sweets.

"Will you permit me to speak with this old slave?"

"Speak, honorable traveler."

"Where do you come from, father?" the dervish inquired of the slave.

"From afar, from Russian lands. I lived with my father, a fisherman, on the banks of the great river Volga, known here as Itil. As a boy I was captured by the jigits of the neighboring Suzdal prince. In our tongue a prince is the same as your khan or bek. Our princes war among themselves, and he who crushes the other takes prisoner the men and women and maidens and children of the defeated prince. Then the victorious prince sells all of them off like sheep to a foreign land. So the prince sold both my sister and me to the Bulgar merchants, who took us to Bilyar, their city of trade on the Kama River, and from there all the prisoners and I among them were driven across the desert to Gurganj. And where my little sister was sold I do not know. It was long ago. Now my hair hangs in white strands like an old goat's, and still I yearn to see my native village on the high bank of the river. I learned to speak Turkmenian and Persian. Were it not for other prisoners like myself I should have forgotten our native tongue altogether. I encounter my fellow countrymen at the bazaar sometimes and exchange a word of our tongue with them. Many of them tread here, clanking their chains."

"What is your name?" asked the dervish.

"Here they call me Saklab, but the prisoners still know me as Old Man Slavka. Forgive me for my bold words," the old man bowed to the ground before the dervish, "but I have overheard that you roam distant lands and, like a saint, can make gold dinars from copper dirhams. So for you it is a trifle to buy me from my master. Buy me and I shall serve you faithfully and honestly. For perhaps you will go to our land, to the Russians, and you will take me with you."

"You want to lure away my slave?" asked the master, disgruntled.

"How can I afford a slave?" replied the dervish. "I live as a poor man myself, sustaining myself on a handful of grain when a generous hand offers it."

"I suppose I will have to lay my head down here in this faraway foreign land," Saklab muttered with a sigh and said loudly, "Please try our *dastarkhan*¹!" Stepping carefully across the rug, he brought forth a brass basin and a pitcher of water.

Mirza-Yusuf and the dervish rinsed their hands over the basin, dried them on an embroidered towel and settled down to eat in silence. When the dervish had tasted all the different dishes, he uttered courteous words of thanks and asked permission to take his leave.

Once on the deserted street he stood for a long time in the shade of the tree staring at the old gate.

"I shall never again see this home where the kind old man once taught me to hold a reed pen and write my first letters. I did not grudge him my only gold dinar just for the chance to spend more time with him and hear his voice so near and dear to me... And now back to the road!"

Mirza-Yusuf stared at length at the door behind which his strange guest had disappeared. Bent-Zankija entered the room and said, "My kind grandfather Mirza-Yusuf! A thought slithers like a serpent in my heart that this dervish Haji Rakhim al-Bagdadi bears a strong resemblance to our runaway free-thinker Abu-Jafar, only he has grown a beard and turned black from the sun, so you have difficulty recognizing in him the boy of the past —"

"Hold your tongue, or else misfortune will befall our home! Would I have spoken with an infidel, damned by the holy imams? Never again speak to me of that transient guest. We live in a time when a mean ear is pressed to every crack and listens to what our lips whisper. Day and night we must remember the words of the poet: 'Only silence is might — all else is weakness.'"²

"Remain silent even before friends? But did not that same great poet say, 'Shut thy mouth before all but a friend'? Keep silent a whole life long — nay! Better to

¹*Dastarkhan* — spread of food, treats. Also the word for an ornate cloth laid out on the floor for feasts.

²From the verse of Abu Said (11th century).

die, but with a song and a joke!"

"Silence, silence!" the old man cried. "Oh Allah, help me! I am alone! The night drags on, but the tale of the great Khorezm Shah is not yet concluded. I await from him a feat of glory, but see only executions and note not great deeds. I fear the hero will prove to be a stone idol, hollow inside where the golden moth flutters and poisonous scorpions creep... Allah, look my way and enlighten me."

Part Two

MIGHTY AND TERRIBLE IS THE SHAH OF KHOREZM

Chapter One

MORNING IN THE PALACE

Service to kings has two aspects: one is a hope for bread, the other is fear for one's life.

Saadi, 13th century

In the pre-dawn twilight three old imams made their way down a narrow street of Gurganj. Before them went a servant with a dull lamp of oiled paper. The old men, holding up the long hems of their wide garments, hopped over gutters bubbling with water.

The darkness carried the heady, spicy aroma of pepper, ginger and dye near the closed shops, and the sharp smell of leather when the imams passed by the saddle-makers' stalls with drawings of harnesses, saddles and boots. A harsh voice stopped them on the square.

"Halt! What business brings you out at night?"

"By the grace of His Majesty we, imams of the great mosque, hasten to the palace of the padishah for the morning prayer."

"Go in peace!"

The three imams approached the high gates of the

palace and stopped. A knock would not help, it would merely be an insult. The gates opened of their own accord. Several horsemen rode out of the darkness and galloped across the square. They were messengers with the orders of the greatest and most sagacious protector of faith and justice racing off in directions unknown to all but the one who had sent them.

The old men, stepping from stone to stone, made their way across a large puddle and walked through the gates. The shah's warriors moved back and forth across the wide courtyard. Two guards recognized the newcomers as clergymen and stepped aside to let them by. The three old men passed several small courtyards. The sleepy watchmen opened the heavy gates, clanking their iron keys.

At last the double doors came into sight. On either side of them, leaning on spears, two warriors in chainmail and helmets stood motionless.

A servant who had approached the imams, raising high a clay lantern with a smoking wick, said, "The guardian of the faith has not yet come out."

"We shall wait," replied the three old men, and slipping off their shoes they stepped onto the carpet, lowered themselves to their knees and opened before them great leather-bound manuscripts with copper clasps.

"Yesterday four rebellious khans sent their young sons as hostages. The shah held a feast. Twelve sheep were roasted," one imam said.

"What will he devise today?" whispered the second.

"The most important thing is to concede with him in everything and not argue," sighed the third.

The Khorezm Shah Muhammad had a dream: he was standing on a hill in the steppe and all around, as far as the eye could see, thousands upon thousands of people were gathered. Thy sky was aflame with the bronze rays of sunset. The sun, still blinding, was quickly descending into the monotonous sandy plain.

"Long live the padishah!" the cries roll in from distant rows. The people bow slowly, their faces concealed behind white turbans.

The entire throng falls to their knees before their

mighty ruler, their robes look like the waves of the ever turbulent Khorezm Sea¹.

"Long live the padishah!" the last distant cries ring out like an echo and everything is hushed. The sun disappears, plunging the steppe into blue twilight and silence. In the fading light the shah sees the bent backs begin creeping towards him, making their way up the slope of the hill.

"Enough! Back!" commands the shah. But the backs are closing in from all sides, innumerable backs in striped robes, crossed by orange sashes. It seems to the shah that each one has a sharp knife hidden in his bosom. The people want to slit their ruler's throat. He lunges forward and kicks the one nearest to him. The robe flies up and soars away like a bird — there is no one beneath it. The shah knocks other robes away with his foot, and beneath them too is emptiness.

"But there is one among them! He has hidden in order to creep up and stab me in the heart, a heart that lives and beats only for the happiness and grandeur of the glorious clan of Khorezm shahs."

"Enough! The shah orders you: go away!" His voice sounds, flat and barely audible, and everything vanishes. The steppe spreads out all around, a void, grey and mute. The stiff blades of grass are like scratches on a dead sky. Now the shah is alone, utterly alone, without his steed. But somewhere here, somewhere very near, behind one of the grey hills, in a purple gully, hides that one singular being who will slit his throat... They all desire his death, but only one has mustered the courage to take his life. Who is he?

In the distance the cry of the throng echoes, "Long live Jelal ed-Din! Glory to Jelal ed-Din, the brave son of and successor to the Khorezm Shah!"

"Having forgotten me, they are already prepared to kiss the hand of my son? I must put an end to this, enough! He who stands in my way will be crushed — be it the Caliph of Bagdad or my disobedient son! Enough!.."

Still half asleep, the shah heard a rustling beside him and felt something cold touch his face. Terror and a

¹The name of the Aral Sea in the 13th century.

passionate lust for life made him strain every nerve and jump up. The shah opened his eyes and peered alarmingly into the dark corners of the room.

Warmth emanated from the red-hot coals in the fireplace. Someone was sitting beside it. It was the wild girl of the steppes they had brought yesterday. She moved away in fear, hiding her face in her hands.

"Who are you?"

"Allah is great! I am Gyul-Jamal, a Turkmen from the steppes. Yesterday evening they carried you in here sleepy and as soon as you lay down you fell asleep. I was frightened by you, so awfully did you snore and moan in your slumber, as if you were dying. Those were the night demons choking you. They fly over yurts in the darkness and pass through the outlet at the top to torment those with murder on their hearts."

"What was that you had in your hand?" And the shah seized her small arms.

"It hurts! Let me be!"

"Show me what you had in your hand."

"I have nothing and never had. Would you like me to sing our steppe song about the nightingale who fell in love with a rose? Or shall I tell you a tale about a Persian prince who saw in the mirror the face of a Chinese princess?"

"I'll have no tales of roses or princes... Ah!.. I've found the dagger's sheath. Why did you come to your padishah with a knife?"

"Let me be! The old men teach, 'Do not beat the horse or you will lose a friend...' "

Gyul-Jamal wriggled free and scurried out of his reach.

"*Vai-ulyai!* You will strangle me! I fear you!"

She rushed for the low double doors and ran headlong into two woman servants who had been eavesdropping.

The shah walked over to the fireplace, breathing heavily. Red flames flickered in his eyes, bulging like those of a bull. He tapped a copper bowl with a reed. An old servant with a goatee appeared through the doors and prostrated himself before the shah.

"That girl is to be put in the carpeted room this evening. Are the *vekil*¹ and the grand vizier here?"

¹ *Vekil* — the palace keeper.

"All await you, Your Majesty, the lord of news¹ and three imams as well."

"And Khan Jelal ed-Din — has he returned?"

"The fulcrum of the throne has not yet arrived."

"Have them wait. Bring the barber to me in the baths to dye my beard and the attendants to rub my back."

The Khorezm Shah stepped into the next room. The old servant, withered and bent, with rheumy eyes, set about gathering up the pillows and quilted blankets and piling them up in the niche of the wall. Something flashed on the rug. The old man bent over and picked up a sharp dagger with an ivory handle.

"It is a Turkmen knife... Oh, those Turkmen girls! Their anger must be apprehended like the bite of a venomous spider. Should I hand it over to the vekil now or hide it? Why hurry?"

The shah tightened the cord on his baggy silk trousers, wound a striped scarf around his portly belly, tucked a silver-sheathed knife into his sash and threw a long brocade sable-lined robe over his shoulders. From the niche in the wall the shah carefully removed a white, skillfully wound turban and with a familiar gesture slipped it over his long, greying curls.

The shah listened by the door with bated breath, gripping the cold handle of his knife.

"A cautious man is always prepared to repel an attack. In the darkness of the palace's winding passages a hand directed by my sworn enemy the Caliph of Bagdad, could strike without warning..."

"Are you here, vekil?" he asked softly.

"I have been awaiting my master for some time now."

The shah moved the wooden bolt aside and opened the door a crack. In the dim light of two oil lamps stood the bowed figures of his retaining dignitaries.

Slipping his bare feet into stiff shoes, grown cold in the night, Muhammad proceeded to the next room. There his servants were waiting. One held a clay lamp, another a silver basin, and a third a pitcher with a curved, narrow neck. They helped the shah perform ablution near the reservoir where water flowed through an opening in the stone floor. A fourth servant held out a long, silk-embroi-

¹*Lord of news* — the head of the state postal service.

dered towel and pulled a pair of patterned woolen socks over his master's puffy feet.

While the Khorezm Shah was engaged in the business of dressing, the vekil informed him of the latest news.

"It is very cold outside. Everything is covered with white hoarfrost... Three imams have come to the palace and await orders... As does the head of the executioners Jikhan-Pekhlevan¹... Yesterday evening a caravan of three hundred camels arrived from Bulgar with a supply of Bulgarian morocco boots and a hundred Urus² prisoners. Some two hundred slaves died on the way, though they were fed millet with sesame seed oil nearly every day. Prior to that another caravan was robbed by Turkmen bandits. It was most likely the work of Kara-Konchar."

"I will crush the Turkmen nomads! But I am most disquieted by the pilgrims from Bagdad. Have any Arab dervishes from Bagdad been seen? All of them are spies for the Caliph of Bagdad, and all of them wish to bring me harm."

"What vile people could wish the great guardian of faith harm?"

"Such have Muslims come to be."

Having finished the business of his toilet, the shah set out on his usual route — first along corridors, then up the spiral of the stone stairway. The vekil and a eunuch with a torch preceded him, opening the doors. The shah accended to the top of the palace's tower.

Chapter Two

NUBA³ TO THE GREAT ISKENDER⁴

On a level clearing alongside a wall with embrasures, twenty-seven young khans stood in a semicircle. They

¹*Pekhlevan* — lit., a "Hercules", "strong man". Used both separately and as a nickname, attached to the principal name. — *Tr.*

²*Urus* — Russian.

³*Nuba* — a musical celebration (a military serenade) in honor of Alexander the Great, introduced by Khorezm Shah Muhammad in the palaces of regional rulers.

⁴*Iskender the Great* — Alexander the Great.

were the sons of the feudal lords of Gur, Ghazni, Bayakh, Bamiyan, Termez and other regions. The shah held these boys and young men in his court under strict surveillance as hostages, so that their fathers would not think of raising the sword of rebellion. All of the young men held drums and tambourines.

Here were also to be found musicians with long horns, oboes and bronze cymbals. Several military leaders of the Khorezm army stood off to one side.

At the appearance of the shah, all began to cheer, "Long live the invincible padishah, guardian of the faith, terror of pagans!"

The shah surveyed the crowd with a sullen look.

"And where is Timur-Melik?"

"I am here, Your Majesty."

The tall, happy-go-lucky Timur-Melik, Muhammad's unfailing companion in all his campaigns, stepped forth, leading two boys by the hands: one was the shah's youngest son by his last wife, a Kipchak princess; the other, his grandson by his son Jelal ed-Din and a Turkmen woman. Timur-Melik stood the boys near the shah. The latter bent to his son and gave him a playful pinch on the cheek. But his grandson he asked harshly, "Where is Khan Jelal ed-Din?"

"Father went hunting with hawks," the boy said. His black eyes looked up guardedly from beneath his white turban.

"Timur-Melik! Send horsemen in three directions and find Khan Jelal ed-Din! The Turkmens continue raiding caravans. They could attack my son as well."

"It will be done, Blessed One!"

From up above, as if from a cloud, a thin, childlike voice sounded, "Blessed is he who keeps vigil! Joyous is he who sleeps not!"

The towering minaret, like a candle held up to the sky, was lit up at the very top by a pink ray of the sun peeking out from behind distant mountains. All the buildings in town were still submerged in hazy twilight.

The eldest of the young khans proffered a drum to the Khorezm Shah. Muhammad exclaimed, "Glory to the great Iskender! Glory to the conqueror of the world! Iskender traversed all lands from Iran to the banks of

Jaihun and Zeravshan¹. Iskender is an example to us, he is our teacher! Let us render him homage by thrice playing the clamorous nuba."

Tambourines and drums began to bang. Bronze cymbals chimed. The long karnai horns roared hoarsely and the whistles started tooting. Three times they made a racket in honor of the courageous Macedonian. When all fell quiet and a hollow echo continued to resound in the tall palace towers, Timur-Melik exclaimed, "We have rendered homage to the great Iskender. Peace unto his ashes! But by virtue of his youth, he accomplished only half of what he was destined to do. Now we have a new Iskender, the great Muhammad, warrior, general and creator of the mighty empire of Khorezm! May Allah prolong the reign of the mighty ruler of Islamic countries, Shah Muhammad Alla ed-Din! Let us thrice perform the nuba in honor of our great shah!"

The clamor of tambourines, cymbals and drums filled the tranquil air anew, the karnai horns groaned fiercely.

Muhammad stood by the embrasure, stern, menacing and pensive, his broad shoulders thrown back, and it seemed as though great thoughts were roaming beneath his snow-white turban.

"Peace be with you! Go now!" said the Khorezm Shah.

One by one, hands folded on their stomachs, all those present ran up to him with short steps; kissing the hem of the shah's robe they backed away and disappeared through the dark opening of the stairwell.

Timur-Melik was the last to go, leading both boys by the hands.

"*Dada* promised to bring me a live gazelle," said the shah's grandson.

"Well, the padishah is going to give me a hunting leopard ... so he'll eat your gazelle and you too, you viper!..."

The shah leaned his elbows against the ledge of an embrasure. Down below, flat rooftops were strewn about chaotically. The palace was made up of many low structures connected by passageways to become one large,

¹*Zeravshan* — lit., "gold river", it flows from sources in the Hissar Range to the south of Samarkand.

irregularly burgeoning edifice. It was surrounded by a high old wall with stout guard towers. Motionless sentries with spears stood out sharp against the brightening sky.

The shah gazed long into the distance at the huge awakening city covered with smoke rising up over the flat houses. Then his eyes stopped on one of the palace yards, where a yurt glimmered white beneath a tall old poplar. Inside it lurked the new pearl of the harem, the swarthy Turkmen Gyul-Jamal who had run from him that morning. Not wishing to reconcile herself to the dark palace chambers, she had demanded a yurt for herself, that she might live as she was accustomed to on the steppe, as simple Turkmen women lived, permeated by the smell of smoke. She did not wish to live with the harem, with the other "roses of Eden". She still failed to understand how she ought to behave! It was little wonder that the queen mother, Turkan-Khatun, hated her so.

"Haughty girl! Raised her hand against her sovereign! We shall see how she writhes and squeals when my favorite leopard enters the carpeted room!.."

Some cries drifted up from down at the base of the tower. In the morning stillness the words sounded clear and articulate: "Hear me, true believers! Shah Muhammad has rejected the laws of Islam. He caresses the Persian heretics and surrounds himself with Kipchak pagans. His father, Shah Tekesh, was an honest Turkmen, but Muhammad has forsaken the Turkmens. Do not trust him!"

"Who is that wailing so? Vekil, why do you not look after order?"

The vekil bowed down low before the shah, as if to beg his forgiveness.

"That is the dervish, Sheik Mej ed-Din shouting from the tower dungeon. He is daunted by neither the fetters nor the darkness of the prison. Your most sagacious mother Turkan-Khatun is particularly well inclined toward him. But he pronounces shameless words against his padishah. Yesterday all the dervishes in town gathered on the field and vowed to take the prison by storm, in order to free that crazed Sheik Mej ed-Din from the dungeon."

Muhammad shook the vekil by the shoulders.

"Stupid dawdler! Go quickly and tell the head of the executioners Jikhan-Pekhlevan that I entrust this rebel to

his strong hands... And tell him to hurry, before the crazed dervishes come and free him."

The Khorezm Shah descended from the tower and went into the reception-room. The walls were draped with red broadcloth. Here three grey-bearded imams were awaiting the padishah. Leaving his shoes at the doors, the shah crossed to the center of the room and lowered himself to the carpet. He slid his legs under a quilted silk blanket that concealed a brazier with hot coals in a recess in the floor.

"Come forward, be seated, my teachers!"

Three imams, kneeling at the edge of the carpet, moved toward him, whispering Arabic expressions of thanks, and sat down near him, likewise tucking their legs under the blanket.

"Commence," said the shah. "Explain to me whether or not I, the most powerful ruler of Islamic lands, am correct in demanding that the Caliph of Bagdad obey me. Explain to me also what I am to do if the caliph does not submit to me."

The imams opened the big old books they had brought with them and began in turn chanting excerpts from the Koran, attesting to the fact that the Khorezm Shah Muhammad was the highest power on earth after Allah, that he was always right and that his every order, his every word was sacred...

The room was dark. A faint light penetrated the round latticed window cut out of the wall at the very ceiling. An oil lamp on a bronze stand gave off a quavering light. The imams chanted Arabic phrases without looking at the text.

Behind the shah stood the important layer of the tablecloth, the head manager of the shah's meals. With a word or the move of an eyebrow he gave orders to the servants gliding silently across the carpet. A second dignitary, the "waiter", received the silver dishes from the head chef. Through the doors peered the faces of the dignitaries, crowding in expectation of the shah's favor.

A black slave with a silver ring in his nose placed a low wide table over the blanket. With a deft motion the layer of the tablecloth spread the table with a silk cloth — a dastarkhan. The "waiter" put down before the shah a silver tray with cups of hot tea prepared with salt and

sheep lard. He placed on the table a stack of thin, browned flat cakes with pieces of fried suet and bowls of melted cow's butter, sour cream and honey.

Listening to the imams' speech, the shah drank down one cup after another, snacking on flat cakes. Warmed by the brazier and the tea, the padishah leaned back on the pillows set down in good time and began to snore. That was a sign that His Majesty was pleased with the scholarly imams' explanations. Everyone exited noiselessly. The table with the dastarkhan disappeared, the dignitaries and servants vanished. Only the black slave squatted beside the door, waiting for the great ruler of the lands of Islam to awake.

Chapter Three

THE PRINCE OF WRATH

Everyone in Gurganj knew the tall, sombre Tower of Eternal Oblivion next to the shah's palace on the main square.

On a low, iron-clad door hung a large padlock. The key dangled around the neck of a guard who sat right there on the step, leaning his short rusty spear against the brick wall. On the ground before the guard lay a rug scrap, where passers-by placed their alms: a wooden bowl of sour milk, flat cakes, a bunch of leeks, a handful of copper coins... The guard occasionally allowed the more generous doners to move closer to the tower and speak with the prisoners.

A few barred round holes gaped black near the tower's base. Hollow cries carried up from the dungeon. When the footsteps of passers-by were heard, the cries in the dungeon would grow louder, bony arms would shoot out through the apertures, grabbing at the air. A simple villager in a striped robe with a faded blue scrap around his head and a mullah in a snow-white turban, tossing the guard a coin, would silently approach one of the openings in the wall and put pieces of bread into the filthy emaciated hands jutting through the bars. Then the cries would grow louder still and the curses of those who could not reach the window would be heard.

"Give to those deprived of light!"

"Sacrifice your old shirt! The ticks are eating me alive."

"Ow-oo! You stepped on my eyes!"

From a side street came the low rumble of a mob. Dervishes in high caps with long staffs entered the square. They shouted out prayers in unison; curious onlookers ran along behind them. The dervishes charged at the prison door and began beating it with rocks and staffs, trying to break the lock. Several peered into the apertures of the dungeon and cried, "Sheik Mej ed-Din al-Bagdadi! Are you alive? We have come to render you praise, martyr of faith and truth! We shall set you free!"

From the depths of the dungeon came a prolonged shriek, and everyone fell quiet to listen.

"May Allah curse the cruel khans who oppress the people! May He smite with the lightning of wrath him who raises his sword against the caliph! May all butchers and robbers perish!"

Thrust aside by the dervishes, the guard fled to the palace. Kipchak horsemen were already galloping from that direction. They dispersed the crowd with whips, and with shrieks the dervishes scattered about the square.

Up above, over the main gates of the palace some people appeared between the embrasures. One, a tall man in an orange striped robe, stood in front. The others, their hands folded on their stomachs stood in deferential silence, awaiting his orders. When the Khorezm Shah appeared on top of the palace gates it was a bad omen: someone's execution was impending.

The shah's executioners came through the gates in pairs. They were burly, muscular men in blue shirts with sleeves rolled up to the shoulders, in baggy yellow trousers, embroidered in red. Bearing large Khorasanian swords on their shoulders, they stretched out along the square's perimeter in a chain, pushing back the pressing mob. Last came the head executioner, the "prince of wrath", Mahmud Jikhan-Pekhlevan, a tall, thin man with rounded shoulders and arms like an ape's — the notorious butcher. His robe was tucked into his wide yellow suede trousers and tied with a wide belt. Over his shoulder hung a carpet bag. In it he would bring to the shah the head of the most important man executed.

A rectangular ditch made a dark spot at the center of

the square where a scaffold rose up and alongside it four pillars with cross-beams. Clanking their fetters, two half-naked slaves hauled up a large willow basket and placed it beside the scaffold.

The prison guard opened the low, iron-clad door. The head executioner and several assistants descended into the dungeon. A clamor of voices sounded from within, followed by total silence. The executioners led fifteen prisoners out of the dungeon. They were all shackled by the right leg to one common chain.

Filthy, barely clothed in rags, their uncut hair grown tangled and matted during their long imprisonment, the convicts clutched at one another, squinting in the bright sun, and shuffled across the square. The prison door slammed shut. The heavy lock was hung back in place and the relentless cries from the dungeon resounded anew.

The guards marched on either side of the fettered condemned men. One of them, a feeble old man with a mop of tangled hair, tripped and fell, bringing down with him his two neighbors. They were forced to their feet by blows and driven on to the execution site. Once on the scaffold, they were thrust to their knees. One executioner would seize the doomed man by the hair while Jikhan-Pekhlevan, holding the sword in both hands, would decapitate him in one stroke, display the head to the hushed crowd and toss it into the basket.

"Which one of the convicts is the leader of the dervishes, Sheik Mej ed-Din al-Bagdadi?" onlookers murmured to one another. The prisoners, emaciated by hunger and illness, all looked alike. When the head of the fourteenth came off, a wail rose and spread across the square, "The padishah is speaking! The padishah is giving an order!"

Everyone turned to look up at the platform atop the palace gates. The Khorezm Shah was standing there waving a colorful scarf. This meant, "Stop the execution! The shah forgives the convict!"

Wiping off the long sword with a red rag, the head executioner commanded, "Bring in the smith!"

The fifteenth prisoner was Tugan, the boy brought up by Mirza-Yusuf. But a youth, he stared wide-eyed, unable to comprehend what had happened.

"Bow down before the padishah for this great grace!" the executioner barked, and turning the boy to face the palace, he made him bow to the ground. The smith, who had been on hand, began breaking the shackle on Tugan's leg.

"Wait! Where are you going? I have not yet finished!" the smith exclaimed, but Tugan, seeing he was no longer fettered to the same chain with the now dead convicts, leaped from the scaffold into the crowd. Shouts and cries burst out behind him, and Tugan, crouching down, made his way through the dense mob, fleeing as fast as he could.

The square near the prison tower was now deserted. The guard stood by the door, leaning against his rusty spear.

A girl, shrouded to her eyes in a long shawl, was making her way toward the tower along the wall. She approached an opening at the base of the tower and called, "Tugan! Tugan, the armory smith!"

Withered arms jutted through the opening and a raspy voice replied, "Your Tugan has already lost his head! Give us something to eat, that we might remember him by a prayer."

The girl fell to the aperture and cried desperately, "Tugan, answer me, are you alive?"

New wails came up from the dungeon.

"Give us what you have brought! Your Tugan needs nothing now! He is already enjoying pilaf with the Prophet in the gardens of paradise..."

The girl gave bread and melon to the hands stuck through the opening and walked over to the guard.

"Tell me, Nazar-bobo¹, is it true that the boy Tugan has died?"

"He has probably died. For he was taken to be executed along with the others..." The guard motioned toward the square.

An old dervish walked up, put a few coins in the guard's hand and whispered into his ear, "Why was our holy Sheik Mej ed-Din al-Bagdadi not among the executed men? Has his execution been postponed or has the Khorezm Shah pardoned him?"

¹*Bobo* – grandfather.

The guard, tucking the money away in the folds of his sash, muttered, "His Majesty grew angry at the sheik for his curses and ordered his immediate execution, before the dervishes could free him."

"But is he still alive?.."

"Oh no! When the prisoners were led out of the dungeon, the head executioner Jikhan-Pekhlevan went down and strangled the holy sheik with his own hands..."

Chapter Four

THE STITCHED-ON SHADOW

Make haste to gladden someone you meet with a kind word: you may never meet him again.

An Eastern proverb

Having made his way through the mob, Tugan found himself on a deserted street lined by solid clay walls. The street led him to the banks of a canal.

The dark cloudy water flowed slowly between high, man-made banks. Long, cumbersome boats moved quietly, loaded with bales, brushwood, hay and sheep huddled together in a bunch.

"Oh, to sail away in a boat like that to a foreign land... But who will admit me, so filthy and covered with sores, in a shirt that has rotted through!"

Not far from the bank a sand-bar shone yellow in the water. Tugan settled down there — rinsed out his clothes, washed, warmed himself in the sun and rested, absorbed in his thoughts.

"Where can I go, a condemned man released from prison? Who will hire me to work? The city is crammed with people, and each man wants to earn his dish of pilaf..." Tugan glanced at the leg that continued to wear the heavy iron ring bearing the inscription, "Forever unto death." "My old Mirza-Yusuf will not wish even to speak with a convict who has left prison; Bent-Zankija alone might take pity on me. But how could I dare appear before her covered with sores like a leper?..

"And still I shall have to return to my master Kary-

Maksum. He will allow me to saw off this iron ring."

Tugan started down the long street, where shops stretched on either side and venders sat on ledges covered with rugs. Goods hung on the open folding doors and lay on shelves along the walls.

Despite the blinding sun, the street was in semi-darkness due to the protective covering of mats above each shop. The rays of the sun fell slantwise, illuminating here a pair of yellow boots embroidered with pink and green silk, there a round iron shield with a quote from the Koran chased in silver, and somewhere else the striped fabrics displayed by venders before a nomad in a wolf-skin *malakhai*¹, or before a group of women in bright, colorful clothes.

Kary-Maksum's smithy was at the end of the row. From all directions came the pounding of hammers, the clangor of sheets of iron. Here the smiths forged armaments: curved sabres, short daggers and spear heads.

The slaves — Persians and Uruses — worked in nothing but their baggy trousers and scorched leather aprons. Bent over their anvils, they chased intricate designs on copper basins. Others groaned as they pounded sheets of red-hot iron with heavy sledge-hammers. Young boys, smudged with soot, stood by bellows, fanning the coals in the furnaces, and ran for water with wooden pails.

Kary-Maksum, stout and broad-shouldered with a grey beard dyed red at the tip, sat on a clay mound covered by a scrap of carpet chiding the workers from time to time and answering the greetings of passers-by. Not far from him two slaves — one young with a brand on his forehead (for having tried to escape), the other old with an indifferent grime face — were dealing measured blows with small hammers to a bundle of iron wires. They were carrying out the most prized work: without heating the blades on the coals, applying the "cold method", they forged the famous ornamental Damascus steel — *jaukhar*.

"What are you doing here? Go on, get out of here!" the smith barked. "What makes you think I would have in my shop a convict who has been in the shah's dungeon?"

¹*Malakhai* — a fur cap with large ear flaps.

"Permit me to take a hammer and I myself will break the iron ring."

"That you might defile my hammers with your crime-sullied hands?! Go away before I scorch you with pincers!"

Tugan walked away, filled with rage at the undeserved insult. The boy was ready to go wherever his feet would take him now. His wandering glance fell on a dervish sitting by the wall. A ray of sun, finding a slit between the mats of the awning, lit up his motley cloak, sewn from patches of different colors.

The dervish was muttering holy sayings in a low voice as he stitched a pink patch over faded blue, orange and green ones.

Tugan stood swaying, all misery and despair. His black shadow jumped, falling on the dervish's knees.

"Look, young man," said the dervish, "I have sewn a new patch to my cloak, and your shadow has fallen on the patch. I have stitched your shadow on along with the patch. Now you are tied to me and will follow me like a shadow."

The boy rushed toward the dervish and sat down beside him.

"Are you speaking in truth or do you jest? I shall serve you and do as you bid, only do not send me away!"

The dervish shook his head.

"I heard the way that arrogant master drove you away. Why do you grieve? Surely the world has not become cramped? Be my guide and companion! Let us leave here together for grand Bukhara. Never stay where you are unwanted; go with a trusting gaze to those who summon you... Now you are stitched to the cloak of a dervish, and the time of your new wanderings has begun. Follow me, my little brother."

Thumping his staff on the ground, the dervish went ahead, and behind him, limping, trudged the exhausted Tugan. Passing by several smithies, the dervish stopped on the street corner. There a sooty wandering smith busied himself near a furnace. He looked like a living skeleton. But his thin hands worked the hammer and pincers with confidence on a small, portable anvil, and one after another at a lively pace little black nails made by the smith plopped into a wooden basin of water.

"Hey, honorable *usta*¹! Can you saw off this ring without hurting the boy?"

"If you give me two black dirhams I shall do it," said the smith, bending over the ring. "The padishah uses good strong iron on the fetters in his prisons. Give me a silver dirham besides and I shall make you an excellent knife from this iron."

The dervish elicited a money-pouch from his sash and showed the old man a silver coin.

"Let it be as you say... But you see here on the ring the inscription, 'Forever unto death'? Make the knife in such a way as to preserve this inscription on it."

"You shall have such a knife," muttered the old man and nudged Tugan. "Put your foot on the anvil!.." He added in a whisper, "May you fight the shah and his butchers 'forever unto death'..."

Chapter Five

GENEROSITY

Thumping his staff, the dervish Haji Rakhim walked along the narrow streets of the huge central market of Gurganj.

There were rows of copper dishware, basins, trays and pitchers, shined and gleaming like fire, adorned with skillfully chased designs. There were rows of fretted copper lanterns for candles and clay bowls, plates and cups. There were rows of fine Chinese dishware, white and blue, as well as Iraqi glassware which produced a resonant ting.

Certain rows smelled of rare balsams, both medicinal and aromatic. Valuable medicines such as Tangut rhubarb, castor oil and attar of roses, *gasul* soap powder ground from salt-marsh herbs — beneficial for the skin, the gums and stomach — these things too were sold here. Here one could find valuable fragrant earth used for bathing, and green Persian clay that removed hair instantly, Bukhara oil that strengthened the hair, and Tibetan musk

¹*Usta* — a craftsman.

and Indian ambergris, and dark wads of intoxicating hashish.

Making his way through the colorful crowd that poured through the bazaar in a noisy stream, Haji Rakhim stopped by the stalls as if expecting handouts, but actually studying each vender carefully, looking for someone.

When he came to the rows where bolts of fabric and broadcloth were laid out, self-important merchants, sitting cross-legged, tossed him some copper coins and said, "Go in peace on your way!"

They feared the dervish's black hand might touch the silvery silk fabric or the precious gold brocade, presented to powerful and distinguished beks as a token of esteem.

In that row Haji Rakhim saw a man who resembled the one he sought. This man sat among other merchants, supported by silk cushions. His gaunt face, pale like Samarkand paper, and sunken black eyes spoke of recent illness. The merchants sitting around him treated him with particular deference, vying with each other as they offered him almond cakes, gingerbread, nuts roasted in honey, and pistachios. The merchant was in light-grey, woolen dress and a colorful silk turban. He held a blue Chinese cup with tea. On his index finger was a ring with a large turquoise — the health-giving stone.

The dervish stopped alongside this shop. The merchants tossed a few coins into his bowl, but the dervish continued to stand in silence.

"Go in peace!" said the merchants. "You have already received your dues."

At last the sickly merchant turned his gaze toward the dervish. His black eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"What do you want from me?" he asked.

"They say you are a strong man and have seen much in your time traveling with caravans throughout the universe," said Haji Rakhim. "Will you answer me one question?"

"If you want me to explain the sacred books to you, then there are people who know more than I, scholarly ulems and holy imams. For I am a merchant, capable only of counting and measuring broadcloth."

"Enough, holy dervish! Go in peace!" the merchants clamored. "We have given to you of our fortune." And they tossed more almond cakes and nuts into his *kyashkul*¹.

"No, I await your answer, for my question will concern you, honorable merchant."

"Speak!"

"If you had a friend, true and faithful, who shared your grief and the hardships of the road and went hungry with you and withstood the heat and the blizzard with you ... would you prize him?"

"How could one not prize such a friend?" said the merchant. "Speak on."

Then the dervish said, addressing everyone, "May your circle be bright, your morning joyous and your drink sweet! Look upon him who was both wealthy and amiable and full of contentment, who had a happy home and a thriving orchard and feasts galore. But I could not deflect from myself the lashes of a wrathful fate, onslaughts of calamity and vicious sparks of envy. I was driven by the whip of black misfortunes until my hand was emptied, my house was vacant, my orchard dried up and the friends of my feasts scattered. And everything was changed. I fed on sorrow, my belly collapsed from hunger, and sleep did not come to bring ruddiness to my pale face. But one friend remained with me. He did not abandon me in my wanderings, when a ravine was my pitiful shelter, a rock my bed, and my bare foot trod on prickly blackthorn. My friend traveled with me to the glorious city of Bagdad, to the sacred abode of the devout, Mecca. All the time he eased my efforts, carried my bag and warmed me on many a cold night. But our lucky star did not hasten to shine down on us. A sudden thunder separated my friend from me when I reached the wealthy plain of Khorezm, and now I am an eternal brother to poverty and have no shelter to pass the night."

"But why were you separated from your friend? For if he has been to the homeland of the prophet he may wear the white band, the sign of a pilgrim — haji.

¹*Kyashkul* — a bowl for handouts in the shape of a boat, usually made from coconut shells.

Who has dared offend him and you?" the ailing merchant asked.

"The cause of our separation is a certain merchant."

"Tell me of him."

"Though I am the most miserable of all, in my travels I came upon one more miserable than myself — a merchant wounded by bandits and abandoned without help. I did all I could, dressed his wounds, wanted to bring him to Gurganj ... and I kept for him the golden falcon —"

The merchant, who had been listening closely, shuddered and interrupted the dervish, "Speak no further! We all know already what became of the merchant. For that merchant is before you now. I have long wanted to seek you out to return your kindness. But who is your friend? Perhaps I can release him too from the anguish of misfortune?"

"You alone can return my friend to me. He does not dare wear a white band or bear the title of haji, because he, like Shaitan, has a tail. It is my donkey. The greedy ruler of the region, with whom you remained for treatment, took my donkey away. If you help me obtain another, then all that I desire will be fulfilled."

"You shall have your donkey. I bought him from the khakim and he is here, in the yard. Do you hear, is that not he who brays and greets you? But that is not enough. You must choose anything you like from this shop: the finest clothes and morocco boots and fabrics — take everything you might need."

"I am a dervish! I have a crude woolen robe, and this is all I need. But I shall touch the hem of your generosity only that you might clothe my utterly naked shadow. My shadow follows me everywhere and has nothing with which to cover a wasted body."

The merchants laughed.

"You poke fun at us, dervish! How can your shadow be clothed?"

"Here it is before you!" And the dervish pointed in the direction of the pauper boy Tugan, who was leaning against the wall.

The ailing merchant clapped his hands.

"Hassan," he said to the servant who had appeared, "take this boy to my shop where ready-made garments

are sold and clothe him as you would a traveler setting out on a long journey."

"Should he be given everything?"

"You shall clothe him from head to toe and give him everything: a chekmen, a shirt, trousers, socks, boots, a sash and a turban. And you, honorable wanderer of the universe, come to my home this evening. Hassan will tell you how to find it."

The servant led the dervish and the abashed Tugan to a shop hung with various kinds of clothing: men's, women's and children's. And though the servant Hassan offered them all the finest garments, the dervish chose only the most durable and practical for the road. When Tugan came out of the shop, dressed like the son of one of Gurganj's inhabitants, with a blue turban wound round his head, Hassan gave the dervish a leather money-pouch and said, "My master, the honorable Mahmud-Yalvach, ordered me to give you these five gold dinars so that you might not want for anything on the road. What is more, your donkey with a saddle awaits you in my master's yard. You may take it at any time. You must have rendered my master a great service. He is rarely generous."

That evening Haji Rakhim visited the merchant Mahmud-Yalvach. The latter was waiting for him in a lovely arbor hidden amid a large garden. When they had drunk a cup of golden tea and the servant left them alone, the merchant asked in a whisper, "What is the golden falcon you spoke of today?"

The dervish took the gold plate with the engraved falcon from the folds of his sash and handed it to Mahmud-Yalvach. The latter snatched it up hastily and tucked it away in his bosom.

"Remember my words," he said. "Whatever may happen, even should there be an explosion of the universe, if you hear of me, do not hesitate to come to my home. I shall always assist you. What will you be doing in Gurganj?"

"Tomorrow I leave here for Bukhara. I am afraid to stay here, where the sword is always drawn over the head and makes no distinction between those in the right and those in the wrong. No, better the staff of a wanderer and the distant road."

Chapter Six

QUEEN TURKAN-KHATUN'S PLOT

Under the leadership of a woman as clever as Turkan-Khatun, the influence of the military (Kipchak) aristocracy soon undermined the power of the throne. Unhindered, the Kipchaks could devastate the lands they had occupied, though they had arrived there under the guise of liberators, and make the name of their sovereign an object of the population's hatred.

Academician V. Barthold

The main gates of the palace opened and horsemen astride stout stallions began riding out, pair after pair. They wore white sheepskin hats, red striped caftans and curved sabres shining with gold.

Muhammad, the Shah of Khorezm, majestic and portly, in his white silk turban with glittering diamond threads, sat sullenly astride a broad-chested bay with a lavish gold harness. The shah's crimson brocade robe, his sash and his sabre, spangled with precious stones, shone blindingly in the sunlight.

The sovereign of Khorezm was followed by two young horsemen. Seated deftly on a black Turkmen stallion with a silver harness was a swarthy, dashing fellow. This was the son of a Turkmen woman, successor to the shah, Jelal ed-Din. Beside him on a piebald ambler with a long black mane woven into thin braids, rode a boy in a brocade robe — the shah's youngest and favorite son, born of the Kipchak princess.

Behind them came important dignitaries of Khorezm, prancing on horses with scarlet saddle-cloths.

The shah's numerous escort split up. One part, moving ahead through the main street of the bazaar, dispersed the crowd of curious folk with lashes. The other half of the shah's jigits brought up the rear of the procession.

Everyone along the way fell to their knees, bowing their heads to the ground. They had not the right to look upon the sovereign of the supreme country of Islam at close range. The merchants, hearing the tremendous roar of the long leather trumpets and the rumbling of the

drums, hurried to drag rugs from their shops and lay them out right in the dirt in the shah's path.

Shah Muhammad was accustomed to the eulogies and cries of loyalty. His indifferent glance swept over the endless striped backs, bowed down before the hoofs of his bay. Nothing could be read on his puffy face. The whiteness of his turban accentuated his big black beard.

On either side of the road that led up to the gates of the palace of the shah's mother Turkan-Khatun stood select Kipchak warriors in the famous Khorezm chainmail and helmets with arrow-shaped nose guards, holding long, light spears.

"Long live and reign Shah Muhammad the invincible!" resounded the laudations of the warriors, caught up by the crowd; people ran out from alleys and clambered onto rooftops and clay walls.

Muhammad was surprised to see that there was an uncommon abundance of Kipchak warriors, several times more than all his escort. Why had they been gathered? Could this be a trap? Turn around perhaps, before it was too late? No, why be so suspicious? The idea that his own mother would set a trap for her son! Had not he let his mother retain power equal to his own upon his father Shah Tekesh's death after all? Had not the Kipchak warriors from her clan Kangly taken part in all his campaigns and brought back to their nomadic lands opulent spoils their fathers never dreamed of? Onward!

Muhammad urged on his horse, which had hesitated before the gates, and was inside the courtyard in two bounds.

Some old Kipchak men in festive robes took the horse by the bridle. The shah lept from the saddle onto a velvet rug that had been rolled out before him. Straight and strong despite his years, he climbed the steps to a terrace with intricately carved columns and, walking past prostrated backs, he entered the cool chambers of the palace. Before him arose a black slave with a gold ring in his nose.

"The queen of queens comes forth to meet you. *Salam* to Your Majesty!" The slave pulled aside a curtain and cried in a high-pitched voice, "Majesty of the world! Guardian of the faith! Sword of Islam!"

The shah took a few steps forward. In the semi-darkness

of the room with varnished wooden walls and latticed windows, a small figure shone in gold brocade. Twenty of the most distinguished Kipchak khans knelt motionless in a semicircle extending to either side. Muhammad, folding his hands on his chest, bowed, approached his mother with quick, short steps and whispered, "*Salam*, Turkan-Khatun, light of virtue, paragon of justice!"

The folds of brocade rustled. The round turban with its plume of ostrich feathers all but touched the floor, then rose again.

"The poor, unfortunate widow, your mother, greets His Majesty, sovereign of the universe. Do me the honor and pleasure of sitting beside me."

Muhammad stood up straight, raised his eyes and saw before him a small face painted heavily with ceruse and rouge, and prickly black eyes reflecting small quivering red flames. Turkan-Khatun sat with her legs tucked up on an octagonal gold throne that looked like a tray: Muhammad, as the ruler of the country, should have sat beside his mother, but there was no room on the throne: it was entirely occupied by her brocade gown. So the shah sat down on the carpet at her side. This was precisely as Turkan-Khatun had anticipated in her desire to show her Kipchaks that the Khorezm Shah sat lower than she.

Muhammad held up his palms and uttered a prayer, then stroked his beard with his fingertips. All those present reiterated the prayer in a whisper.

Turkan-Khatun spoke in gentle, ingratiating tones, shaking her head, so that her brocade gown rustled evenly and the feathers in her turban quivered.

"I have summoned you here, my great, my beloved son, that we might discuss together important business. It concerns the happiness and well-being of our illustrious lineage of Khorezm shahs and the fate of the Kipchak khans so devoted to you. We must protect our throne, our power and our allies!"

The room was quiet. Only from without could the distant cries of "Long live the Khorezm Shah!" be heard through the slits in the latticed windows.

"I hear you, my mother, woman of boundless wisdom!"

"Rumors have reached my humble abode that you are prepared to undertake new campaigns to distant lands.

Once again you shall dash across the plains of battle on your magnificent steed. But who can read the predestinations of the Almighty, written in His Book of Life, before the assigned time? Should you die on the field of battle, a martyr for the true faith, and be spirited away like lightning straight to the gardens of paradise, then disorder may arise here in the absence of your powerful hand — may Allah protect us from this! And since our proud grandson Jelal ed-Din prefers to share secrets with the Turkmens, preparing to slaughter us Kipchaks, we ought to consider: would it not be wise to appoint someone else to rule the land of Khorezm in Jelal ed-Din's stead?"

"Wise words! As precious as diamonds!" exclaimed the Kipchak khans.

"Therefore," the queen went on, "having taken council with these most distinguished khans of our native Kipchak people, I have decided, my dear son, to convey to you the unanimous request of all the Kipchaks that you name your youngest son, Kutb ud-Din Ozlag Shah, son of your favorite wife, the Kipchak princess, heir to the throne, and send Jelal ed-Din to rule the most distant lands — he is a constant threat to you and to all of us!"

Everyone fell quiet as they awaited Shah Muhammad's response. He said nothing, pensively curling a strand of his silky beard around a trembling finger.

"If you refuse, all the Kipchaks will leave Khorezm for their steppes without delay, and I, as the poorest of paupers, shall go to wander with them..."

Seeing that Muhammad continued to waver, Turkan-Khatun turned her head. Behind her back stood the young manager of her estate, Muhammad ben-Salikh, a former *gulam*¹ promoted by her for his beauty. He understood the gesture of the small hand, left the room and immediately returned, leading by the hand a seven-year-old boy in a brocade robe.

"Here is your new heir to the throne," Turkan-Khatun exclaimed in a sharp, commanding voice. "I proclaim to the Kipchak khans, beks, warriors and simple subjects that the Khorezm Shah agrees to look upon him as the fulcrum of the throne."

¹*Gulam* — a senior servant.

All the khans lept up, took the boy in their arms and lifted him up several times.

"Long live our Kipchak sultan!"

Muhammad rose, took his son from the khans and sat him beside his grandmother, Turkan-Khatun.

"Listen, beks," said Muhammad. "As you see, I have carried out your wishes. Now you shall carry out my will. My long-standing enemy Nasir, the Caliph of Bagdad, has begun once again to plot against me and incite my subject nations to rebellion. There will be no peace in Khorezm until the wicked Nasir has been disposed. Then a clergyman named by us and loyal to us will become caliph. Therefore, I shall not stop until I have routed the caliph's troops and driven the point of my spear into the sacred soil of Bagdad."

The eldest of the Kipchaks, a poor-sighted, shriveled old man with a narrow grey beard, said, "All as one we shall drive our steeds wherever your mighty hand indicates. But first we must calm down and help our frightened clansmen. Messengers have come from the Kipchak steppe. They say that unknown people, savage pagans who have never heard of the holy faith of Islam, have poured into our lands from the east. They came with their herds, camels and carts. They have occupied our pastures, they drive our people away. We must hasten to our steppe, crush these pagans, take their herds and give their women and children to our warriors as slaves."

"Send troops to our steppe!" the khans cried.

A scribe with a reed pen in his hand approached the Khorezm Shah and knelt before him, holding out a sheet of paper covered with writing.

"What is this?" asked Muhammad.

"The supreme order on the transference of succession to your most favored youngest son Kutb ud-Din Ozlag Shah. Temporarily, until he comes of age, the ruler of Khorezm and trustee of the young heir will be his grandmother, your mother, the Queen Turkan-Khatun. And the manager of the queen's estate, Muhammad ben-Salikh, is named as the heir's tutor and the grand vizier of Khorezm."

"And you, my great son, the invincible Khorezm Shah Muhammad, can go with the army throughout the universe and wage battles with whomever you wish while

we are ruling," said Turkan-Khatun.

Muhammad signed the order without reading it and handed the reed pen to his mother. She took the pen and carefully wrote in large script: "Turkan-Khatun, ruler of the universe, queen of all women of the world."

Shah Muhammad looked around, seeking out his eldest son, Jelal ed-Din. He was afraid should their eyes meet. But he was not there. The vekil whispered in the Khorezm Shah's ear, "When he saw so many Kipchak warriors, Khan Jelal ed-Din said, 'I am no sheep to walk into the Kipchaks' slaughter-house,' and turning aside, he raced off like the wind."

Chapter Seven

THE PRISONER OF THE HAREM

On the shoulders of the vekil rested the difficult task of seeing to the "good spirits" of the Khorezm Shah's three hundred wives. His duties also included observing their behavior and informing the sovereign of Khorezm of any alarming signs of flippancy.

Having been ordered by Shah Muhammad to find out everything about the thoughts, sighs and tears of the girl brought from the Turkmen steppe, the vekil summoned the soothsayer Ilan-Torch ("Scale of the Snake"), experienced in unraveling the artful designs of female cunning. She was at once a fortune-teller and a sorceress and a narrator of happy and horrible tales.

After hearing the vekil's riddling speech, the "Scale of the Snake" realized that three questions interested him: was there some dashing jiggit on the steppe for whom the young Gyul-Jamal pined? Was she party to any secret talks with the wilful Turkmens? And had she had a dagger the night she spent with the shah?

"I understand," said the "Scale of the Snake" holding out her palms.

The vekil dropped a few coins into them.

"But among the coins I see no gold one."

"Bring me important news and you shall have a gold one..."

The old soothsayer, lean and dark, with big silver

rings in her ears, stepped through the gate into the yard of the new pearl of the harem and stopped. Her black squinting eyes scanned the small yard surrounded by high walls. As was typical of the yards of other princesses, a long single-storey structure without windows extended on one side with a terrace onto which opened five folding doors. A stream flowed through the middle of the yard into a round pool. Two beds of roses bloomed lavishly on either side. Back by the wall, beneath a tall, branchy poplar stood a lone Turkmen yurt, ornately covered with thick white felt and colorful cords.

Straightening her striped cloak, Ilan-Torch started toward the pool. A slight, very swarthy girl with elongated black eyes sat on a stone step. She was taking grains of cooked rice from a Kashgar cup and throwing them to the tiny silver carp. Ilan-Torch fell to the stone tiles, and kissing the hem of the girl's crimson gown, began in a low singsong, "*Salam*, 'Smiling Flower', my beauty! Let me kiss your luminous hands, touch your shadow!"

The soothsayer sat down near the girl. Words of affection, exaltation and flattery poured out in a habitual, uninterrupted stream, while all the time she thought, "What made the padishah fall for her? She is slight and as swarthy as an apricot; she hasn't the shapely body or fullness of the other beauties of the shah's harem! Indeed, the oddities of our lords are boundless!"

"What is heard from the steppe?" Gyl-Jamal interrupted her.

"One khan from the steppe recently sent a camel for me so that I might cure him of yearning for his beloved. Everyone there remembers you, calls you the lucky one. 'The Khorezm Shah loves our Turkmen beauty most of all his wives', they say. 'He has adorned her fingers with rings, the stones of which emit blue sparks, erected a white yurt with Persian rugs, and every day he sends her roasted pheasant and duck stuffed with pistachios...'"

"I am called the padishah's wife, but I am the three hundred first wife! I would rather be the wife of a simple jiggit. In the steppe I am envied, but me, I long for the wind that carries the smell of wormwood and heather across the Kara-Kum. Here my head aches from the constant smoke of the shah's kitchen. What use to me is a white yurt if I see nothing but this grey wall, the guard

tower with the sentry and the old poplar? Once I wanted to climb to the treetop to see the blue vistas of the step-pes, but the eunuchs pulled me down. Then they even cut the ropes of the swing. Tell me, is this happiness?"

"Oh, if I had but one hundredth of what you do, I would be happy. But there is no one to give me duck with pistachios!"

"Girls," called Gyul-Jamal, "prepare a dastarkhan! And you, woman, tell my fortune."

Two slave girls hurried toward the white yurt. An old Turkmen woman, a red band adorned with silver coins on her head, approached them and sat down on the ground. She stared intently at the soothsayer, following her every move.

The "Scale of the Snake" spread a saffron cloth out on the stone slabs and dumped a handful of black and white beans from a little red pouch. She made circles around the scattered beans with a thin bone stick and spoke unintelligible words in the language of the nomadic tribe Lyuli¹. Widening her fiery black eyes, rolling their bluish whites, she began explaining in a hoarse whisper, "Here is what the beans say, as I was taught by the elders. There is a jigit on the steppe, a strong and fearless man despite his youth. Were he to meet a tiger he would not fear but pierce it with an arrow. Were he to meet ten bandits, he would be the first to lunge at them and slaughter every one. This jigit is madly in love with you. He does not sleep nights, listening constantly to love songs and gazing at the sky... Her eyes, he says, are like these stars. I see you sigh. Do I not speak the truth?"

Gyul-Jamal shuddered. The gold and silver coins sewn to her gown tinkled. She took hold of one of the coins and tried to yank it off, but the coin held fast.

"Ene-jan, bring me the scissors!"

Ilan-Torch whispered insinuatingly, "Where is your small knife with the white handle? As a girl of the steppes, you always carried it in your sash."

A shadow of alarm flitted across Gyul-Jamal's face. The old Turkmen woman rose gravely and brought from the yurt a pair of large scissors used for trimming threads in carpet-weaving. Gyul-Jamal snipped a thin gold coin

¹Lyuli – a nomadic tribe from the region of present-day Afghanistan.

off her gown and clutched it in her swarthy hand.

"You just made up a tale about the pining jiggit. Why do you not call him by name?"

"The beans do not tell me this. Only your heart will utter the name of the one who is madly in love."

"Kipchaks brought me here by force, to the padishah's harem, when many jigits on the steppe were fighting over me. But are we girls asked by the elders to whom our hearts are drawn?"

"This spotted magpie has twisted everything," the old Turkmen woman broke in angrily. "A wife of the padishah can have in her heart but one name — that of our master, Muhammad the Khorezm Shah, as fair as Rustem¹, as brave as Iskender. And every woman in the palace lives only for him, thinks only of him. Do not listen to this sly woman, Gyul-Jamal!"

In through the gate walked a fat eunuch in an enormous white turban and beckoned to the fortune-teller. She ran to the omnipotent guard of the harem and exchanged whispers with him. When she returned she fell to the stone slab, and touching the hem of Gyul-Jamal's gown, she said, "Forgive me, a good-for-nothing woman. Now the mother of the new crown prince Ozlag-Shah has called for me to tell her fortune. There is no time to sit in peace..." Once more she kissed the gold coin she had received, and following the eunuch, she disappeared through the gate.

Chapter Eight

A HERALD OF GRIEF CAN BRING GLADNESS

The Khorezm Shah conducted affairs of state in one of the farthest removed chambers of the palace. "The walls, too, have ears," but there could be none here in this windowless room hung with carpets and reminiscent of a well, where only above, in an opening in the ceiling, did the stars shine at night. Here the shah was not afraid to discuss confidential matters with the head executioner or listen to the vekil tell of the latest escapades of his multi-

¹*Rustem* — the hero of a Persian epos.

tude of bored wives. Here the shah whispered orders: secretly strangle an incautious khan who had uttered impertinent words about his ruler at a feast, or send masked horsemen to the estate of a miserly bek, very tardy in delivering his platters of gold coins. On more than one occasion, following a secret meeting of the shah in the carpeted room, the desperate cry of an anonymous unfortunate would be heard at dawn as he tumbled from the palace's high tower and smashed on the rocks below. On more than one occasion had the executioners thrown men squirming inside sacks from boats into the dark waters of the swift Jaihun, because they had lost favor with the shah. After which, in the dim light of the half-moon, a song would carry across the river's expanse:

*Nightingales burst into song in your gardens by spring,
And roses of scarlet grow in your flower-beds.*

And the oarsmen would take up the refrain:

O magnificent Khorezm!

That evening Muhammad sat gloomy and withdrawn while the vekil informed him of what persons had visited his son, Khan Jelal ed-Din, that day.

"Three Turkmens arrived on fine long-legged stallions. One of them hid his face, shrouded by a shawl. Note was made of the fact that he was young, well-built and had eyes as keen as a hawk's."

"Why did you not detain him?"

"In a nearby grove he was awaited by an entire detachment, some four dozen daring Turkmens. However, in Merdan's *chaikhana*¹ at the bazaar, where Turkmens usually go, one of my men overheard the name Kara-Konchar spoken more than once..."

"Kara-Konchar, the menace of the caravans!"

"True, my lord. But can it possibly be that the successor —"

"He is no longer the successor."

¹*Chaikhana* — a tea-house in Central Asia.

"Allah speaks through the lips of the shah! But still it would be difficult to conceive of even an ordinary bek stooping so low as to converse with a bandit of the caravan routes..."

"What does one not hear in our troubled times!"

"Does my lord not think that if Jelal ed-Din were to go far away, to the holy city of Mecca, for instance, his conspiratorial whispers with the Turkmens would cease?"

"I named him ruler of the distant Ghazni on the Indian border. But there too he will gather round him rebel khans and persuade them to march on China. And then Khorezm will fall apart, like a watermelon split by a knife. No, it is better to keep Jelal ed-Din here, within arm's reach, so that I can always feel him out."

"A wise decision!"

"Only listen here, you vekil, wagging your tail! If I ever hear again that the bandit Kara-Konchar is freely roaming Gurganj as he would his nomad camp, your head along with its lustreless eyes will be thrust on a spike before the palace of Jelal ed-Din..."

"May Allah keep us from this!" the vekil muttered, backing toward the door.

An old eunuch walked in.

"In accordance with Your Majesty's orders, Khatun Gyul-Jamal has arrived in your chambers and awaits your commands."

The shah got to his feet with feigned reluctance.

"Bring her here to the carpeted room..."

The shah went out into the corridor and, crouching, stepped through a narrow door and started up a spiral staircase. In a small cubby-hole he bent down to a carved wooden lattice of a narrow window and prepared to observe what would happen in the carpeted room.

The beardless old eunuch with a bent back and wide hips wrapped in a cashmere shawl, opened the ornate carved door. He held in his hand a silver candelabrum with four guttered candles.

Looking back at the small figure shrouded in colorful fabric, he sighed compassionately.

"Well, let us go!" he squeaked in a high voice.

He pulled aside the heavy curtain and raised high the candelabrum. Gyul-Jamal slipped through, twisting as

if she expected a blow from above, left her shoes by the door and took two steps forward.

The narrow room hung with red Bukhara carpets seemed meant for play. The ceiling went far up into the darkness.

The eunuch left. The key turned with a click in the door. High in the wall a window with an intricately patterned lattice lit up — the eunuch had probably set a candle there. A similar window made a dark spot on the opposite wall as well. Could there be someone peering through it?

Gyul-Jamal had heard mention of a carpeted room. The women in the harem told tales of the executioner Jikhan-Pekhlevan strangling adulterous wives while the Khorezm Shah watched through a latticed window high in the wall. Could this be the very carpeted room she had landed in?

Gyul-Jamal walked around the room. Several small rugs — the kind usually put down for prayers — lay on the floor. "Maybe they wrap a doomed woman in one of these rugs when they carry her out of the palace at night?"

Tossing a couple of colorful silk pillows into a corner, Gyul-Jamal sat down on them, on her guard and starting at the slightest rustle.

Suddenly the carpet that hung over the door stirred and a beast's head appeared from under it. In the dim twilight its round eyes threw off green sparks.

Gyul-Jamal jumped up, hugging the wall. The black-spotted yellow beast crept noiselessly into the room and lay down, resting its head on its paws. The long tail swished and rapped on the floor.

"A leopard!" thought Gyul-Jamal. "A hunting leopard, a man-eater! But Turkmen women do not give up without a fight!" Falling to her knees, she seized the edge of one of the carpets. With a snarl the leopard began creeping toward her.

"*Vai-ulyai!* Help!" shrieked Gyul-Jamal and lifted the carpet slightly. The beast's powerful leap knocked her over.

She shrank into a ball, hiding under the rug. The leopard, striking with its paws, tried to claw through the heavy material.

"Help! My last day has come!" Gyul-Jamal wailed.

She heard a loud pounding at the door and arguing voices. The people's shouts and the beast's snarling intensified... Then the noise stopped... Someone threw off the carpet...

A tall slender jigit in a black sheepskin hat, his cheek slit from temple to chin, stood near the girl, wiping his sword on the edge of the carpet. The old eunuch had taken hold of the jigit's sleeve and was trying to pull him away.

"How dare you come in here, into forbidden chambers! What have you done, wretched thing? How dare you butcher the padishah's favorite leopard! Our lord and master will have you impaled."

"Let me alone, beardless one! Or I shall chop off your head as well!"

Gyul-Jamal started to get up but fell back limply onto the pillows. The leopard lay in the middle of the room and seemed to be holding its severed head in its paws. Its body continued to twitch.

"Are you alive, khatun?"

"And are you seriously wounded, jigit? Your face is bleeding."

"Ah, it is nothing! A scar across the face is decoration for a warrior."

The head of the guard, Timur-Melik, burst into the room. Several soldiers crowded at the doors.

"Who are you? How did you get into the palace? How dared you beat the sentries! Surrender your weapon!"

The jigit unhurriedly replaced his sword in its sheath and answered calmly, "And who are you? Not the head of the guard Timur-Melik, by chance? *Salam*! I must see the Khorezm Shah concerning business of extreme importance to him. Bad tidings come from Samarkand."

"Who is this impertinent man?" roared an authoritative voice. The Khorezm Shah strode into the carpeted room, his hand on the hilt of his dagger.

"*Salam*, Great Shah!" said the jigit, folding his hands on his chest and bowing slightly. Then he straightened up abruptly. "Here you are engaged in jokes, frightening frail women with desert kitties, while important affairs are taking place in the universe. I met a messenger from Samarkand on a caravan route. He had driven his horse until it was spent, and then continued on foot

until he dropped. Like a madman he cried, 'There is an uprising in Samarkand. They are killing all the Kipchaks and hanging them from trees like sheep carcasses in meat shops.' At the head of the insurgents is your son-in-law, Sultan Osman, the ruler of Samarkand. He wanted to slit your daughter's throat as well, but she and one hundred daring jigits are holding up in the fortress, defending themselves night and day. Here is a letter from your daughter..."

The Khorezm Shah snatched a red packet out of the jigit's hands and opened it with the tip of his dagger.

"I shall show them an uprising!" he muttered, straining to read the letter in the dim light. "Samarkand has always been a nest of rebels. Listen, Timur-Melik! Call together the Kipchak troops without delay! I am setting out for Samarkand. There are not poplars or ropes enough there to hang all those who dared raise a hand against the shadow of Allah on earth... Take that woman to her white yurt and summon a doctor to her... Jigit, how are you called?"

"Ah, why ask! Just so, one small jigit in the vast desert!"

"You have brought me black tidings, and according to ancient custom I must put a herald of grief to death. And besides that you have butchered my favorite leopard. How shall I execute you — I really do not know..."

"But I know, my lord!" exclaimed Timur-Melik.

"Speak, brave Timur-Melik, and proclaim it to this audacious jigit in my name."

"In affairs of war to lose a day or even an hour is to lose victory. This jigit has displayed great diligence in delivering this letter that is good and important for Your Majesty. It says that your daughter is alive and bravely repulsing the enemies' attacks, as if she herself were a warrior. Now you, my great padishah, will fly to Samarkand in time to save your courageous daughter from death. For this service the shah forgives the jigit all his crimes. And in compensation for the slain leopard, the Khorezm Shah obtains another, even fiercer leopard — this daring jigit himself — and names him commander of one hundred Turkmen horsemen whom the jigit will bring with him. They will join the detachment of your personal guard..."

The Khorezm Shah stood befuddled, curling a lock of his black beard around a finger that bore a diamond ring.

"A falcon does not turn back in flight, the Khorezm Shah does not speak two different words," said the jigit with dignity. "Where do you order this Turkmen girl delivered?"

The jigit bent over and carefully lifted the prostrate Gyul-Jamal. At the threshold he stopped instantaneously, tall, slender and sullen, and said, addressing the Khorezm Shah as an equal, "*Salam* to you from Kara-Konchar, the menace of your caravans!" Then he proudly continued on his way.

The shah looked at Timur-Melik and did not know whether to be angry at him or thank him. Timur-Melik laughed loudly.

"Indeed, what a valiant dare-devil! And you, my lord, said that a Turkmen could never be relied upon. With an army of jigits like that you will conquer the universe."

Several days passed. When the slender crescent moon had risen above the minaret, a few noiseless shadows crept past the palace in the darkness of the night and stopped at the place where the branches of the old poplar reached over the wall.

A rope ladder with a hook was tossed to the top of the wall. One shadow clambered up. Smoke curled up out of the white yurt, light shone through the cracks. At the hoot of an owl a shrouded woman came out of the yurt.

In the darkness sounded the words, "All Turkmens are brothers! *Salam*! Is Khatun Gyul-Jamal well?"

"I am her servant. Woe is us! The Khorezm Shah left with his army three days ago to suppress the insurgent Samarkand. Now the sharp eye of the vicious old woman, the shah's mother Turkan-Khatun, looks after the palace. She ordered our 'Smiling Flower' taken to the stone tower of the palace and doubled the guard. She said that Gyul-Jamal will remain in the tower for the rest of her life."

"Go to her. Here is a gold dinar for the eunuch and two more for the guard. Have Khatun Gyul-Jamal tell the shah's mother that she wants to say a prayer at the grave of the holy sheik, which is located outside of town on the wide road. Turkan-Khatun will not dare deny her

the right to pray, and when she leaves town Kara-Konchar will do what is necessary."

The shadow climbed back up the wall and disappeared into the darkness.

The servant whispered, "There is none in the world more evil and cunning than Turkan-Khatun! If she wants to get rid of someone, who can stop her?"

Chapter Nine

IN THE GARDENS OF THE DISFAVORED HEIR

Here is my steed, and here is my weapon! They will
count as my feast in the garden.

Ibragim Monteser, 10th century

Timur-Melik was an experienced warrior who had seen his share of battles. He did not fear danger. Many were the times the enemy's sabre had loomed over him, spears had pierced his shield, arrows been lodged in his mail; he had been preyed upon by leopards, overtaken by tigers, death had been near, shrouding his eyes in its black cloud. What more could frighten him? Therefore, having no fear of the Khorezm Shah's wrath, Timur-Melik set out for the Tillyaly gardens outside town in order to call upon its master, the Khorezm Shah's disfavored son, Jelal ed-Din.

He found the young khan in the depths of the dense garden. Jelal ed-Din sat alone on a rug lost in thought. He rose nimbly and went to meet his guest.

"*Salam*, brave Timur-Melik! I invited several friends here, but most of them have already sent their 'regrets', explaining that illness would keep them away. Only three nomads from the steppe and you, Timur-Melik, were brave enough to call upon the disgraced governor of faraway Ghazni, which, of course, I shall never even see."

"The shah's will is sacred," said Timur-Melik, seating himself on the rug.

"But surely it is not my fault," Jelal ed-Din continued pensively, "that I was born of a Turkmen woman while all the Kipchaks want to have a Kipchak successor? Let

it be a Kipchak, but let my father allow me to leave as a simple jigit for the border, where there are constant squirmishes. I love the fervent steed, the shining sabre and the desert wind; I do not wish to lie on a carpet listening to the songs and tales of the old men."

"But war is all around us," said Timur-Melik. "The Kipchak beks are asking the Khorezm Shah to take his army and march into their steppes. An unknown people has come from the east and is seizing our land, driving the Kipchaks' livestock from the good pastures —"

"Better it would be for my father to drive all the Kipchaks out of Khorezm and rule without them," observed Jelal ed-Din. "The Kipchaks have grown sybaritic and corrupt. When the going gets tough they are sure to betray my father."

"What makes you think so?" asked Timur-Melik.

"When the shah does not trust the people of Khorezm and turns the defense of power and order over to the alien Kipchaks, then he is like a man who entrusts the guarding and sheering of his sheep to the steppe wolves. Soon he will have neither wool nor sheep, and he himself will be had by the wolves for dinner."

Jelal ed-Din glanced at the gulam and raised his eyebrows. The servant came forward and bowed.

"We have a great dastarkhan prepared for many guests, but they are not here. Place an outpost on the road and ask the names of everyone who passes. Find among them those people capable of cheering my soul and bring them here. And set before me my favorite stallions: since the invited guests have not come I shall feed my horses and the paupers off the road —"

"You invited me and I am here!" sounded a calm voice. Out from amid the bushes of the garden stepped a tall, slender Turkmen in a big sheepskin hat. He bowed, his hands pressed to his chest.

"I am glad to see you, leopard of the desert, Kara-Konchar. Come and sit with us."

Ali-Jan, a charge-hand from a small fortress on the eastern border of Khorezm, raced along the great caravan route with five jigits. He made the shortest possible stops, only to feed the horses. Ali-Jan feared that he would not deliver his unusual prisoner to Gurganj.

Oncoming travelers stopped and asked what dangerous bandit had been seized. Horsemen galloped alongside the prisoner, trying to catch a glimpse of the bound man's face. But Ali-Jan struck with a lash anyone who came near, and the curious travelers fled in haste.

They had already forded two canals and made their way across a rickety bridge of poles and branches. And now the blue tiles of Gurganj's mosques and minarets glimmered amid poplars in the distance. Suddenly Ali-Jan's way was blocked by six men in crimson caftans riding black steeds with white harnesses.

"Halt, jigits!"

"Off the road!" cried Ali-Jan. "In the name of the guardian of the faith, do not detain those who are racing to *divan-arz*¹ on important business."

"You are the ones we need. The son of the Khorezm Shah Jelal ed-Din orders you to turn off the road and appear before him immediately in his garden."

"We must ride directly to Gurganj, stopping nowhere, to our master Timur-Melik..."

But the horsemen held fast the reins of Ali-Jan's steed.

"Timur-Melik himself is here now in the garden sitting with the bek and both are listening to songs. Turn off, I tell you! Why do you fight? Your prisoner will not die, and Jelal ed-Din will give you a fur coat, a handful of silver dirhams, as well as your fill of pilaf. What pilaf the bek has! Nowhere will you taste pilaf like this!..."

Ali-Jan caught an appetizing whiff of mutton fat and shouted to his jigits, "Stop! Turn off to this estate. Here we shall experience bliss!"

The jigits turned off the road with their bound prisoner, passed by the glum sentries at the high gates and rode into the first courtyard. In the hazy twilight, six hearths, set in a row, blazed with high blood-red flames. Women in crimson gowns moved around them. In the red glow of the fires they seemed aflame themselves.

The horsemen dismounted and tied their steeds to tethering posts. The prisoner remained bound in the saddle. His horse stamped its feet and shook its head, tugging to join the other horses, for whom the jigits had thrown down armfuls of hay. The women ran up and clustered

¹*Divan-arz* — the chancery.

around the prisoner, wondering at his unusual appearance.

He was tied to the beast with horsehair ropes. His long blue dress with red stripes sewn to the sleeves and his flat felt hat with a turned-up brim spoke of some alien tribe. Two black braids knotted at the ends curled down to his shoulders like the two horns of a water buffalo. His slanted eyes seemed wild, fixed on one spot. The crowd murmured:

“Why, it’s a dead man!”

“No, he is still breathing. All pagans are tenacious.”

“Follow me!” a servant said to Ali-Jan. “And bring that monster with you.”

Ali-Jan untied the horse with the prisoner and led it cautiously along a path through the shady garden, where young peach trees alternated with the opaque foliage of tall, dark-green elms.

A ditch with swiftly flowing water circled round a small arbor. Before it stood twelve stallions in a row — six black and six golden-red, all with glossy silken coats and crimson ribbons braided into their combed manes. Each stallion was tethered to a low post. Two jigits with bronze trays walked around to each horse, hand feeding them slices of melon.

Ali-Jan was so struck by the horses’ beauty, their fiery eyes and swan-like necks, that he did not notice at once the group of people sitting beneath an enormous old elm.

The clearing, spread with a Persian rug, was set with silver dishes and Iraqi glass vases. They were laden with sugar cookies¹ dyed many different colors, candies, fresh and dried fruit and other sweets. Several men sat in a semicircle. A dark-skinned youth in an Indian turban and a black chekmen sat apart from the rest, and everyone addressed him with deference as their host. A few musicians near the clearing played for all they were worth: some strummed, others tooted on flutes, two beat tambourines, filling the garden with the whimsical sounds of mesmerizing music.

“*Gelubsen, gelubsen!*”² said the dark youth jumping

¹In those times sugar, made from Indian and Egyptian sugar cane, was a highly prized luxury item.

²*Gelubsen* — come here.

up. Everyone followed his example and got to their feet. The youth walked up to the motionless prisoner. Ali-Jan then realized that this was the shah's son Jelal ed-Din.

"Did you take him prisoner? Where did you find him?"

"I came across him in the steppe near Otrar. Strong and wiry he is too: he nearly slipped away!"

"Who is he? What tribe is he from? What does he say?"

"He does not want to answer. He keeps silent."

"However, life is fleeing his eyes. Is he dying?"

"I do not know, Your Majesty. I have raced for all I am worth, that I might present him alive before the eyes of the Khorezm Shah."

"You have all but killed him with the galloping. We must force him to speak."

Jelal ed-Din clapped his hands. A servant appeared.

"Summon Zaban, the medicine man, and have him come with all his phials and medicines. Tell him a man is dying."

"Yes, my lord!"

The prisoner started to come to. His eyes widened, hollow sounds escaped from his gaping mouth, and he began shrieking, trying to free himself from the ropes.

"What is he shouting?" asked Jelal ed-Din.

Ali-Jan explained, "He sees your horses and exclaims, 'Fine steeds! Beautiful horses! But they will not remain here. They will all end up among the herds of Jenghiz Khan the invincible. He alone will ride your horses!'"

"How is it that you understand the words of this pagan?"

"I used to travel with the caravans to China and visited Tatar nomad camps. It was there I learned to speak their language."

"And who is this Jenghiz Khan the invincible? Why is he invincible? How dare this pagan speak so insolently!" said Timur-Melik indignantly. "Only the Khorezm Shah Muhammad is the invincible ruler of all peoples. I will slay this prisoner if he continues to talk this way."

"Let him say what he likes," Jelal ed-Din broke in, "and we shall retain all he knows about this invincible leader of the Tatars."

A thin voice sounded from out of the bushes. Someone approached swiftly, pattering excitedly, "May Allah grace all Muslims with such prowess as is possessed by the son

of the sovereign of true believers, the most honorable and most valiant Jelal ed-Din, bearer of the bright sword and the most beautiful steeds in the world! And may his sword come crashing down with earth-shattering thunder upon the heads of all the enemies of Islam!..”

A small man with a long beard and a huge turban was coming quickly down the path through the garden. He carried a leather bag and a large clay jug. Various bronze instruments, knives and phials hung about his sash and tinkled with every move. When he had reached Jelal ed-Din he bowed to the ground.

“Your benevolence wrenched me from the clutches of misfortune. Your boundless generosity brought me to your doors. I was just told that I must save a dying man —”

The flood of eloquent words was interrupted by Jelal ed-Din.

“Estimable Zaban! Give your voice a rest while you have a look at this ailing man and pour into him all the wisdom of your knowledge and all the medicine of your phials. Try to revive him.”

“I am your servant, I am your slave. That which my khan tells me I obey at once!..”

The little medicine man began giving orders. The servants untied the prisoner and took him off the horse; he was barely able to stand, his legs bent, frozen in the position he had assumed in the saddle. Loath to touch the foreigner, the servants whispered prayers as they gingerly removed the prisoner’s clothing and laid him on a felt mat. He lay meekly, oblivious, his eyes rolled back in his head.

Uttering incantations, Zaban poured clear oil over the sick man’s chest and with an ivory spoon began scraping off the worms that clung to the dried sores like cooked rice.

“Worms already... But in the sacred book it is written: ‘For all the ailments Allah created, the All-Wise created medicines to cure them.’ ”

When blood began to ooze from the sores, the doctor covered them with oiled swabs and ordered the servants to swathe the entire body in rags.

“O radiant Khan! O lord of mine!” he said, addressing Jelal ed-Din. “I am a scholarly Arab physician, a kaddakh,

a specialist in eye diseases¹ and the treatment of wall-eye, who has studied the books of Hippocrates, who sets dislocations and drives away death. I am your slave and servant and depend upon your grace. Tell them to bring a pitcher of old wine, that I might prepare the medicine. After my treatment the sick man will begin to speak and will continue for a day or two, then he will either die or get well, as Allah wills it..."

Having received the wine and mixed it with various powders, the doctor drank of the remedy himself and fed it to the sick man, who came to and began to speak.

With a feverishly ruddy face the prisoner first sang and shrieked incomprehensible words, then he began to speak evenly and rhythmically, as if reciting poetry. Ali-Jan listened carefully and translated.

"Lovely and joyous is my homeland; there is none fairer," said the prisoner, his burning eyes staring into the distance. "Thirty-three sandy plains stretch from border to border between pink mountain ranges. Even the most prized steed cannot gallop around them. Wild beasts roam in the tall, lush grass, antelopes of seventy different colors dash along, clear-voiced birds sing. White swans and geese fly in the turquoise sky... There is room for all but my poor nomad camp in the steppes of my homeland. Strong tribes with their greedy khans stole our green pastures, where strange herds of fat horses, cattle and sheep now graze... And only the stone-strewn *gobi*² and rocky ravines are left for my poor weak tribe. The herd has withered and shrunk, the horses have wasted away and stagger in their weakness. All this is the fault of the arrogant khans and their kagan Jenghiz Khan, the red-bearded invincible who leads the Mongols to other lands to pillage the universe..."

"What Jenghiz Khan is this he mentions?" asked Jelal ed-Din.

Ali-Jan translated the question. The prisoner cried,

¹The level of medicine practised by Arab scholars was very high. "In the entire course of the Middle Ages European physicians did not publish a single treatise on ophthalmology equal to the Arabic. Only at the start of the 18th century do works appear in this field that begin to surpass Arabic studies." (*I. Yu. Krachkovsky*)

²*Gobi* — the Mongolian word for "desert".

"Who does not know of Temujin Jenghiz Khan! I left him. He does not forgive those who dare stand before him without bowing their servile backs! He avenges the wilful, he hunts down those who once fought him and slays their entire clans down to the last infant."

"And who are you? Why do you speak out so boldly against Jenghiz Khan?"

"I am the free hunter Gurkan the Valiant. I am my own khan, my own *nuker*¹, and I quit Jenghiz Khan's host because that old sour-puss ordered my brother's and father's backs broken, because that red-bearded kagan steals the most beautiful girls and makes them his slaves, because he tolerates no will but his own kagan's will on this earth. I shall go to the ends of the universe, where there live only beasts and free hunters like myself, and I will live there where no nukers of the wicked Jenghiz Khan will ever find me."

"Where is Jenghiz Khan now? What plans is he making?" asked Jelal ed-Din.

"Now the kingdom of Jenghiz Khan is like a lake with too much water that no dam can retain. Jenghiz Khan is always ready for attack; all his soldiers have sharpened their swords and await the order to fly on the countries to the west. They will come galloping here and plunder your lands."

"We will keep this young lad here to live with us," said Timur-Melik. "He will marry a Turkmen girl, place his yurt in the camp of the fearless Kara-Konchar, and will roam the Kara-Kum as a free hunter."

"But who is this Jenghiz Khan?" asked Jelal ed-Din. "I am troubled by what he says. We must find out everything about him."

"Forgive me, gracious khan," said Timur-Melik, rising. "I must go to the divan-arz along with this prisoner. I will learn from him everything about this scoundrel Jenghiz Khan."

"Forgive me as well, gracious host," said Ali-Jan. "My jigits have had their fill of your sweet dastarkhan, and the horses have received abundant fodder. Now our hearts are light, having experienced bliss. Permit us too to move on now and deliver this cursed pagan to Gurganj, to the fortress."

¹*Nuker* — a warrior in a khan's personal guard.

“*Hosh!*”¹ replied Jelal ed-Din. “Gulam, give this jigit a new sheepskin coat.”

Ali-Jan bowed low and said, “Flight for the bird, salam to the guests, thanks to the host, and for the jigit — the road!”

Part Three

BATTLE AT THE RIVER IRGIZ

Chapter One

CAMPAIGN TO THE KIPCHAK STEPPES

Afrosnab exclaimed, “I am off to war! Color with henna the tail of my steed!”

From an ancient Persian song

The Khorezm Shah Muhammad raced from Gurganj to Samarkand, full of rage. He had decided to avenge mercilessly his son-in-law Osman and the citizens who had dared raise their swords against their shah.

Muhammad besieged the city, declaring that for their disobedience he would slay every inhabitant to the last infant and slaughter even the foreigners. The citizens of Samarkand fought long and hard, blockading the narrow streets with logs until at last Khan Osman came before Muhammad, carrying a sword and a piece of white cloth for a cerement, thus expressing total submission and preparedness to be executed with this sword. The Khorezm Shah softened at the sight of his son-in-law Osman who fell prostrate before him, and agreed to pardon him. When the city surrendered, the shah's daughter Khan-Sultan, who had bravely defended the fortress besieged by insurgents, came to her father. She refused to forgive her husband and demanded his death. That night Osman was executed, as were all his relatives, children included.

¹*Hosh* — very well.

Thus an end was put to the age-old dynasty of Karakhanids¹, the rulers of Samarkand.

The Kipchak khans who had arrived along with the Khorezm Shah dealt with the population of Samarkand most ruthlessly. They slaughtered more than ten thousand citizens and wanted to continue the carnage and plunder of the city, when the shah's mother Turkan-Khatun, cruel but cautious, intervened and persuaded the Kipchak khans to stop the massacre.

Samarkand was subsequently made the Khorezm Shah's capital. He undertook the construction of a large palace.

The Kipchak khans demanded that the Khorezm Shah march his army into their steppes and rout the Merkits, a Tatar tribe that had appeared from the deserts in the east and driven away the Kipchaks. The shah procrastinated, using governmental affairs and the construction of the palace as an excuse. Then his mother, Turkan-Khatun, approached him with the same request.

Like an old she-eagle which sits in an inaccessible nest at the top of a cliff and guards her bare-necked young, peering with a keen eye far out across the steppe, Turkan-Khatun, the craftiest and most cautious of women, protected the shah's throne from dangerous rebellions of the forever discontented population, from the infidelity and treachery of the insidious khans and their secret encroachments. At moments of danger she would dispatch loyal Kipchak detachments from her gloomy, inaccessible palace in Gurganj in order to destroy anyone who dared raise a hand against her son, the invincible Khorezm Shah, and undermine his power. So how could the Khorezm Shah not respond to the summon of his cautious mother?

Early in spring the following year Muhammad arrived in Gurganj and marched from there in command of a large cavalry force. Ten detachments were dispatched from the city over a period of ten days. Each detachment numbered six thousand horsemen. Reserve pack horses carried

¹The Karakhanids were a Turkic dynasty that came to power in Samarkand in the 10th century when Turkic tribes pressed into Central Asia and occupied the arable lands between the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya. The period of rule of the Karakhanid dynasty was marked by cultural regression and repressions by the khans, resulting in repeated popular uprisings. (V. Barthold.)

barley, wheat, rice, oil and skins filled with koumiss.

The Khorezm Shah loved the glitter of war, the droning rumble of battle drums, the hoarse wail of battle trumpets summoning to the march. At the head of tens of thousands of horsemen galloped a wide-breasted bay, swishing its tail dyed scarlet. A gold harness gleamed on the horse, semi-precious stones sparkled, and silver bells jingled on the animal's legs. Who in Khorezm would not know the bay horse with its black-bearded rider in the snow-white turban, embroidered with diamond threads!

This horseman — the defender of Islam, the pillar of the true faith, the dread of the pagans — sent the lightning of his will and wrath to the very Caliph of Bagdad, Nasir, a descendant of the Prophet. This horseman — Khorezm Shah Alla ed-Din Muhammad, who had pushed the borders of his kingdom to the deserts that Iskender the Great himself had not reached — was the invincible conqueror of the universe.

The army stretched a distance of ten days' journey. Each column of several thousand horses drank up all the water in the wells during the halts, so that only after a whole day would the water level rise again.

The first detachment was made up of scouts. The Khorezm Shah rode in the second detachment. It included swift camels, loaded down with tents, kettles, and the abundant reserves of the royal kitchen.

In the tenth and last detachment rode the shah's disfavored son Jelal ed-Din with the forever discontent and disobedient Turkmens. The Turkmens were at odds with the Kipchaks, unable to forgive them their arrogance and greed. The Turkmens would build campfires in large circles and hold war dances around them by night; they performed round dances, singing war songs and swinging their flashing curved sabres over their heads.

Their route passed along the shore of the Khorezm Sea. Having crossed the river Saihun¹, the detachments reached the narrow gulf of Sary-Chaganak. Here the shah set up camp. He was awaiting news from the scouts who had been sent ahead, and in the meantime he took his hunting falcons and went far along the shores of the turquoise sea, returning to the camp with strings of ducks and cranes.

¹*Saihun* — the Syr Darya.

The scouts reported that the Merkits' horse herds had been seen to the north, in the lower reaches of the river Irgiz, where it flows into lake Chelkar. The Khorezm Shah waited for all the detachments to catch up, summoned their commanders and drew up a plan of attack. The whole army would move in three columns. The shah himself would be in the middle one, which was to deal the final, decisive blow. The left wing would be led by the Kipchak Khan Turgai, and the right by Jelal ed-Din, son of the Khorezm Shah — Muhammad wanted to see what his unruly and self-confident son would prove worthy of in battle.

A messenger galloped up to the camp, bringing a package from Turkan-Khatun, the shah's mother. The vekil and the mirza followed the shah into his tent. Muhammad split open the package with his dagger. Inside was a small pouch of crimson silk. The Khorezm Shah pressed the pouch to his brow and his lips and opened it. There he found a letter written in large script on a narrow paper scroll.¹

"Your Majesty, blessed defender of faith and justice, Alla ed-Din Muhammad, Khorezm Shah — may Allah watch over your reign! — *Salam!*

"All the imams in every mosque utter prayers five times daily to the Creator Most High, ruler over all, may He prolong your reign and grant you victory over your enemies! So it will be!

"A dervish sent by the Caliph of Bagdad was apprehended at the bazaar. The dervish was preaching to the gullible mob that Allah would chastise our beloved shah for supposedly having adopted from the Persians their profane faith, and as punishment for this a pagan people of Yajuji and Majuji² would assail Khorezm and destroy our kingdom. Jikhan-Pekhlevan seized him, and after torturing him with a hot iron, cut out his tongue and hanged him in the square at the bazaar.

"This execution inspires fear in the masses. Everything

¹At that time Samarkand was famous for the quality of its paper, exported to other countries.

²Yajuji and Majuji — the names given to some unknown peoples, encountered frequently in Eastern tales.

else is fine. Your empire will know peace and prosperity for many years to come!"

"Turkan-Khatun — ruler of women the world over."

Early the next morning the detachments set out at an accelerated pace and reached the river Irgiz in two days' march.

The steppe was green with fresh spring shoots. Yellow and purple irises and red tulips gayly dotted the plain, usually scorched and dead. The sun would warm the earth with its blinding rays, only to disappear a moment later behind rain clouds.

The river Irgiz was still bound by a thin layer of thawing ice. Water spilled over the surface of the ice and showed through in dark patches, making the troops' passage to the opposite bank impossible.

The Khorezm Shah ordered the detachments to wait, instructing them to hide in the hollows beyond the reeds so that the Merkits would not detect them and retreat further into the desert.

The army rested for two days without campfires. On the night of the second day a strange light appeared in the sky. Crimson like burning coals, it did not wish to succumb to the darkness, and the stars would not come out. Dusk seemed to continue right through till dawn.¹ The Sheik-ul-Islam² who accompanied the army explained this as a sign from Allah foretelling the radiance of a great glory in store for the Khorezm Shah Muhammad.

When the river was free of ice, scouts located fords and all the detachments crossed to the other bank.

The barren steppe, interspersed here and there by hills, stretched in all directions, silent and ominous. Following barely discernible paths, the detachments marched east. They moved in a more condensed formation now, ready for imminent battle.

In a rocky valley some black yurts were spotted. They appeared to have been abandoned in hasty flight. Felt mat, women's clothing and old rugs were strewn along the roadside. Here too lay a man with two black braids over his ears and narrow eyes in a yellow face.

¹This atmospheric phenomenon, similar to the Northern Lights, is mentioned in all the historical chronicles of that period.

²*Sheik-ul-Islam* — the head of the Muslim clergy.

His faded blue, ankle-length robe was slashed to shreds. A little farther along a two-wheeled bullock cart lay overturned.

The scouts, who had ridden to the top of a hill, indicated something down below with signs and gestures. The army turned, forming a semicircle.

The horsemen moved forward at a trot, then slowed their steeds once more. Spread out before them was a grey plain that seemed to be scattered with dark rags. A horse, saddled but riderless, roamed the plain.

"The field of a battle!" said the warriors. "With the help of the immortal Allah, their lives have ended."

"But who else helped end them? Who snatched the spoils from our hands? Where are their herds, their horses and camels?"

The detachments set out across the corpse-strewn field. What had appeared as rags from afar were actually bodies, mutilated by swords, pierced with arrows and spears. They lay alone and by the dozen. The clothing and shoes had been removed from some.

The horsemen dispersed on the field, picking up a fallen sword here, a round shield or spear there.

The Khorezm Shah rode about the field pensively, winding the tip of his black beard around his finger. His attendants spoke quietly among themselves.

"The battle here was a fierce one. Several thousand Merkits were slain. None were spared; the wounded were finished off..."

A horseman came charging up and shouted, "I've found a Merkit alive. He can speak!"

The Khorezm Shah started off at a gallop, his retinue racing after him.

The Merkit was sitting at the foot of a hill. Kipchaks had squatted around him and were bombarding him with questions. The Merkit's head was shaved from his brow to his nape and smeared with blood.

The Khorezm Shah reined in his horse.

"What does he say? What tribe is he from? Who was it that slaughtered them?"

Sobbing and moaning, the Merkit began his tale:

"Our people was a great people, and now it is no more! It was called Merkits. Our khan was Tuktu Khan... He fled with his son Kholtu Khan, the famed hunter: no one

could shoot an arrow farther or straighter than he. Both khans said to the simple soldiers, 'Flee with us from the wrath of the red-bearded Jenghiz Khan; he has resolved to sever the Merkit tribe at its root... In the west, beyond the salt lakes and to the very sea stretch the Kipchak steppes; there we will find a place for ourselves. We shall see much grass, loved by the bulls, and dense reeds; there our herds will once again become fat and fertile. The Kipchaks will not refuse us charity and will allow us to eat with them from one pot and drink from one waterskin...' So spoke the khans. What choice did we have? Behind us was death, up ahead was freedom and happiness. But two wicked hounds pursued us, their noses fixed to our trail. It was the elder son of the red-bearded one, Juchi Khan, who sicked those hounds on us, those hounds whose names are Sabutai Bahadar and Tohuchar Noyon¹... We fled in haste, as fast as we could... We wanted our horses' trail to be lost amidst the pebbly gobi and the red sands. But our horses were wasted, their hooves cracked, and they lacked their former vigor... Like men entranced with rage the Mongols attacked us. We had nowhere to run when twenty thousand Mongol horsemen swept down on us. The river Irgiz was flooded, ice floes drifted in its waters, the horses stuck in the swollen earth... The great Merkit people is no more! Some fell on this field, slain by the Mongols, others were taken prisoner... The red-bearded Jenghiz Khan laughs, sitting on a mount of felt mats in his yellow yurt! The ancient glory of the Merkits has perished! But one traitor of the Merkit race remains alive — a beautiful young princess named Kulan! Jenghiz Khan made her his last wife..."

The Kipchaks began to shout, "Lead us against those bandits! We shall show them! They are not far away! They cannot possibly drive their bulls and prisoners quickly. We shall fight to regain the spoils!.."

"We shall soon catch up with them!" said the Khorezm Shah and ordered the trumpeters to summon the men scattered about the field, pulling the clothes off the slain Merkits.

¹Sabutai Bahadar and Tohuchar Noyon were two outstanding Mongol commanders.

Chapter Two

BATTLE WITH AN UNKNOWN TRIBE

"Do you know, father, what Zal said to the valiant Rustem:
" 'The enemy must not be thought insignificant and helpless.' "

From an ancient Persian song

The army marched all night. Only two short stops were made to feed the horses.

Toward morning a fog spread over the steppe. Several of the detachments lost touch with the rest of the troops. The scouts called to one another in shrill mournful voices, imitating the howl of wolves and jackals.

A fresh breeze dispersed the fog. The crests of some hills came into sight in the golden strip of sky over the horizon. At their foot flickered an endless number of campfires, and groups of horsemen, camels and cargo wagons on great high wheels grew increasingly distinct.

It was the camp of an unknown tribe. The approach of the Khorezm Shah's troops had already been detected there. Having emerged out of the melting clumps of fog, thirty horsemen came into view. They moved in three groups of ten. The sun's first slanted rays illuminated their long blue robes, iron armor and iron helmets. They sat astride small horses with thick legs and long manes. In the forward-most group, riding a tall Turkmen stallion, came a white-bearded Muslim in a white turban and a crimson coat embroidered with yellow flowers. Alongside the old man came a horseman carrying a spear with a white horse's tail at the end.

"*Salam*," shouted the old man, "I too am a Muslim! Allow me to speak with your commander, may Allah protect him!"

"In our army we have many commanders, but only one is our leader, the terror of the universe, the sword of Islam, Khorezm Shah Alla ed-Din Muhammad."

The old man dismounted. His hands folded on his chest and his body bent slightly forward, he approached the spot where the Khorezm Shah paraded on his magnificent steed, surrounded by silent, handsomely attired khans.

"The head of the Mongol army, the Great Noyon¹ Juchi Khan, son of Jenghiz Khan, sovereign of eastern countries, ordered me, his interpreter, to greet the mighty sovereign of western countries, Alla ed-Din Muhammad, may Allah prolong your reign a hundred and twenty years! He says unto you, '*Salam!*' "

"*Salam,*" said the shah.

"Khan Juchi asks why the shah's brave army set out on the trail of the Mongol army, moving in such haste all through the night."

The old man awaited an answer. But the shah, stroking his black beard, fixed his menacing gaze on the Mongol emissary and said nothing.

"Khan Juchi instructed me to say that his father, the invincible sovereign Jenghiz Khan ordered his commanders Sabutai Bahadar and Tokhuchar to punish the insurgent Merkits who fled from the khan's will. Having crushed them, the Mongol troops will go back to their native steppes..."

The old man fell silent for a few seconds, peering into the shah's stern, impassive face, then went on:

"Jenghiz Khan, ruler of all peoples who dwell in yurts of felt, has ordered all of us to be friendly in our dealings with Muslim troops should we encounter any. As a sign of friendship Khan Juchi offers to hand over to the troops of His Majesty the Shah part of the spoils taken and the Merkit prisoners as slaves."

Then the shah struck his horse with his whip. The bay reared, staid by the strong hand of Muhammad. And the shah uttered his famous words, which were immediately recorded in the *Campaign Notebook of Feats and Battles and of the Shah's Aphorisms* by his court scribe Mirza-Yusuf: "Tell your leader: if Jenghiz Khan did not order you to engage in battle with me, then Allah issues me another command — to attack your army! I want to win the grace of the almighty Allah by crushing you, vile pagans!..."

The interpreter stood dumbstruck, mulling over the words of the Khorezm Shah, but Muhammad had already galloped off in the direction of the army that was hastily maneuvering into battle formation.

¹Noyon — a prince.

The interpreter rejoined the Mongol horsemen, mounted his steed, and the whole group headed back to its army. They took a few slow steps, then leaned into the horses' manes and galloped toward their camp at full speed.

The battle began.

The old Muslim had barely reached the Mongol camp when several detachments split off, heading out to meet the Khorezm Shah's troops, and halted on the sloping hills.

The Khorezm Shah gave the order to the khans: "Break the army into three parts: a right and left wing and a middle. The two wings must surround the Mongol camp, that no one may slip away. The middle, where I am, will be a reserve force. I will move it to the place where assistance and a decisive blow are required. The enemy will not attack us head-on. But if they do, all the better: they will get stuck in the salt-marsh."

The shah rode to the top of a hill. Below him the steppe stretched out far — the site of the impending battle. The shah dismounted his horse and sat down on the carpet that had been put down for him. The *dastarkhanji*¹ laid out a silk-embroidered cloth and spread it with trays of flat cakes, raisins and dried melon. He filled some cups with koumiss and passed them out to the young beks who accompanied the Khorezm Shah during the campaign, studying military tactics.

The fast-moving camels with the provisions were brought to their knees. The *dastarkhanji* gave orders while he and the servants got out gold pitchers and platters, and the finest delicacies in order to replenish the Khorezm Shah's strength, expended by the march.

The right wing was commanded by the Khorezm Shah's disfavored son, Jelal ed-Din. The black stallion carried him to the top of a sand-hill at a gallop. The young khan gazed out over the field of battle, shading his narrow black eyes from the sun with his small hand.

"Summon Kara-Konchar!" he shouted to a jigit. A burly young Turkmen in a red caftan descended the

¹*Dastarkhanji* — the head meal servant. — *Tr.*

hill at a gallop and returned with a lean horseman in a black sheepskin hat and a black cloak. Kara-Konchar rode up to Jelal ed-Din and, leaning down to him, listened closely to his words. The khan explained the plan of the impending battle. Kara-Konchar's hawk-like face expressed no excitement whatever; only in the brown eyes, as round as an owl's, did a gay spark flicker.

"See that salt-marsh?" said Jelal ed-Din. "Therein lies either our destruction or our success. There are not so many Tatars. Our numbers are three times greater than theirs. But quantity is not what matters. Can I trust our jigits? I learned from the dying Merkit that there are but twenty thousand Mongols. This means that if half goes against our wing, it will be only ten thousand. We have six thousand Turkmens alone, plus five thousand Kara-Kitais. But the Kara-Kitais have submitted to the padishah out of hunger and want. They set out on this campaign not to fight but to warm their hands by others' campfires. I will send them before us as skirmishers. They will go eagerly so as to reach the Tatar wagon trains first. But that Merkit called the Tatars 'crazed tigers'. In battle the Tatars will crush the Kara-Kitais and charge at us. Here we will have to meet them with all our fury, deal them a blow to their flank and drive them into the salt-marsh. They will get stuck there and we will slay them. After that we will move to my father's rescue. The padishah will have to forget the blissful tranquility of his soul and the roast duck for today. Hey, jigits, ride to the Turkmen khans and tell them that today Kara-Konchar, leopard of the Kara-Kum, will lead them into battle."

Six jigits raced to all the Turkmen detachments, scattered about the hills. When the army heard the name Kara-Konchar, everyone began buzzing with excitement. Who had not heard the name Kara-Konchar, the terror of Khorasan and Astrabad?! No one had suspected that this silent black horseman on the lanky bay horse was the fearless and elusive jigit of the Kara-Kum Desert.

Kara-Konchar dashed up to the Turkmens, summoned a few horsemen and, briefly explaining the battle plan, led three thousand horsemen away behind a hill, where he was to wait in hiding for the Tatars.

Jelal ed-Din on his black stallion raced up to the Kara-Kitais. In felt caps, astride small shaggy horses, they

awaited Jelal ed-Din in a disorderly mob, their short spears jutting out like bristles.

"Daring Kara-Kitais!" Jelal ed-Din cried. "You are mountain leopards, you are the bravest in battle! Here before you is the camp of cowardly tramps. Like thieves in the night they stole our lavish spoils. It belongs only to us, the masters of this steppe. Attack them and take everything you want!"

The Kara-Kitais started and charged toward the Tatar camp at a gallop. Dust billowed up around them, and, the faster the horsemen galloped, the louder grew their wild cries, merging into one solid roar.

Pulling back the long hems of his sable robe, the Khorezm Shah Muhammad settled down comfortably on the rug and gnawed at the leg of a wild duck with his strong white teeth. The other leg was being consumed by the Sheik-ul-Islam, the sole member of the shah's retinue given the privilege of sitting on the small rug opposite the padishah. Even the participant in all the shah's campaigns, Timur-Melik, his favorite, the "hilt of his sword and shield of his tranquility" — even he stood, hands folded on his stomach, listening to Muhammad's profound conversation with the white-bearded head of the clergy, who had wished to accompany the shah in his campaign in order to engage in unceasing prayer to Allah for victory.

The Khorezm Shah jested, occasionally glancing in the direction of the enemy, who had gathered on the steppe in detachments. In the quiet morning air horsemen could be clearly seen racing back and forth between separate units, their round metal shields flashing in the sun.

One group of daring Mongols bolted out ahead. They clashed with the Kipchak jigits... Their shining swords flew high above their heads and came down again! One horseman fell; the horse, its saddle slid down under its belly, raced about the steppe in awkward bounds, kicking up its hind legs.

Then the attack began. Several Kipchak cavalry detachments raced across the yellow plain.

The shah put down the duck leg and cried, "Beks, attack! Allah is your support!"

At the shah's order the Kipchak detachments began to fan out like arms in order to embrace the Mongols. But

the Mongols did not attempt to slip out of the ring closing in on them.

A first detachment of Mongols moved away from the camp. A thousand horsemen in close order, a hundred men to a rank, charged ahead on small shaggy horses encased in iron and leather armor. There was no question that they would break through the disorderly, wavering line of Kipchaks, stretched wide across the steppe.

"Khu-khu-khu-khu!" reverberated the Mongols' animal roar.

A second thousand pulled away from the camp and swept across the steppe. The steel helmets, metal shields and curved swords flashed brightly in the sun.

From atop the hill the shah watched as detachment after detachment split off from the mass of Mongol troops and charged uncontrollably forward with hoarse cries of "khu!"

The Kipchaks scattered. The rear detachment headed toward the camp to plunder the Mongol wagon trains. But another thousand broke off from the enemy camp and with the same ease and orderliness bore off to one side, cutting off the Kipchaks. The two detachments engaged in fighting.

A dust cloud enveloped the battle site. Individual Kipchak warriors emerged from the cloud and, clutching at their horses' necks, dashed off into the steppe.

"I have never seen anything like this!" cried the shah, getting to his feet. He wound the tip of his beard around his finger anxiously, peering into the distance.

One after another, four Mongol detachments in strict order made for the center of the shah's fanned-out army, toward the hill where Muhammad and his retinue stood watching.

The Mongol cries of "khu-khu-khu!" sounded ever nearer.

Who would stop this avalanche? Muhammad glanced around. Timur-Melik was no longer beside him. Jumping on his horse, he had raced off in the direction of the battle.

The best, tested Kipchak detachments rushed toward the Mongols. The latter were detained for but an instant in order to clear the way, then raced on toward the hill where Muhammad stood.

"My horse!" roared the shah. "My horse!" And

without waiting to make himself heard, he scurried quickly to the foot of the hill, where two horse tenders were holding by the bridle a bay stallion with a red tail.

The shah mounted hurriedly and bolted into the steppe. At his heels galloped his attendants with a clink-clank of armor, harnesses and bells.

Only the crumpled rug with bronze platters, gold cups and scattered sweets remained on the hill. The wind ruffled the edge of the bright silk dastarkhan. Only one of the shah's attendants did not escape in time. It was the white-bearded Sheik-ul-Islam. He had fallen from his horse when the entire retinue went charging after Muhammad at a gallop. The imam made his way back up the hill, straightened the rug and knelt down on it. He dug into the muslin folds of his snow-white turban and elicited a gold oval plate.

When the Mongols reached the hill, three commanders and the old interpreter climbed to its crest. One was young with a sombre face, black eyes and a thin black beard braided at the end and tucked up behind his left ear. The second was a fat old Mongol with a withered right arm. A purple scar cut across his face, so that one eye was screwed up tight and the other bugged out, peering inquisitively at everything around. The third was tall and lean and covered from head to toe with steel armor. They were the eldest son of Jenghiz Khan, Juchi, and two commanders who had already made names for themselves in China — the one-eyed Sabutai Bahadar and the slender Tohuchar Noyon. The imam remained in the trance of his prayers, bowing to the ground.

"He is a servant of Allah," said the interpreter. The imam rose, folded his hands on his chest and with a bent back moved in mincing steps toward one of the Mongols.

"I have been a faithful servant of the ruler of the universe Jenghiz Khan for three years now," he said meekly and held out the gold plate. "Every month I sent letters with the caravans to the chief of the first Mongol post on the great route to China. Now I ask you to take me into service of the Mongol army. I do not wish to return to Khorezm..."

The interpreter translated the imam's words. Juchi Khan took the gold plate carelessly.

"A small paitza with a gyrfalcon..." he commented,

continuing to observe the steppe attentively, where horsemen were galloping in all directions. He returned the gold plate to the Sheik-ul-Islam and said, "No! We need you while you warm yourself at the heart of your lord. Go back to your trusting shah and continue sending us faithful letters."

And the Mongols instantly forgot about the imam. The fighting was moving closer to the hill. Jelal ed-Din's Turkmens had overrun the Mongols' left wing, slaying part and driving the others into the marsh.

The three Mongol leaders descended the hill at a gallop.

The battle went on until evening. The Turkmens and Kara-Kitais made their way over to the left wing and attacked the Mongols. They fought in separate detachments. The Mongols would scatter and, retreating, bear off to one side, then suddenly turn their horses back and rush upon the Turkmens pursuing them, only to turn and flee once again. With the onset of dusk the Mongols raced off all at once to their camp.

The Khorezm Shah returned to the hill and spent an anxious night there. The Kipchak warriors lay down around him, tying their horses with lassos.

In the distance the sky lit up in blood-red flashes, reflecting the flames of the Mongol campfires. The fires burned all night. "The Mongols are preparing for a morning battle," the Kipchaks said. Moans and cries for help sounded from either side of the steppe; half the Kipchak force had been felled in that battle and lay dead or wounded.

Jelal ed-Din sought to persuade the Khorezm Shah, "Retreating after the Mongols proved unable to do anything with our army is to squelch our glory. They are now regrouping in their camp... So we must right now, this very night, steal up, stage a surprise attack and finish them off."

"I shall continue the fighting tomorrow," said Muhammad, muffling up in his sable robe.

When the sun's slanted rays dashed across the steppe and long shadows stretched from the hills, the army of the Khorezm Shah, broken into three parts again, moved on the Mongols.

But their camp beyond the smoking fires was vacant: there was not a single Mongol in sight. Only the brutally

butchered corpses of some Merkits lay here and there, and a few lame camels limped about.

The Turkmen detachment sent in pursuit of the Mongols returned toward evening.

"The Mongols retreated to the east with such speed that we saw only a cloud of dust carried away into the distance."

"They are fine warriors; I have never seen the likes of them!" said the Khorezm Shah and ordered his men to turn their horses back.

"Those were advance scouts," said Jelal ed-Din to the shah. "They will return with an enormous army. We must pursue them now, follow them, find out what they are planning, and hastily prepare for war ourselves —"

"You reason like an inexperienced youth," replied Muhammad. "The Mongols will never dare attack me again!.."

Part Four

ENEMIES ON THE BORDER

Chapter One

THE MONGOL ARMY PREPARES FOR AN ONSLAUGHT

This king was distinguished for his extreme cruelty, his perspicacity and his victories.

From a Persian tale

In the upper reaches of the Black Irtysh, at the foot of a lone barrow amidst the green steppe stood a yellow silk tent. It had been taken by Jenghiz Khan from the Chinese emperor. Behind the tent stood two large Mongol yurts, covered with layers of white felt: in one lived the most recent wife of Jenghiz Khan, the young Kulan (the daughter of the Merkit khan slain by the Mongols) with her little son Kyulkan. The other housed seven servants — Chinese slave girls.

On a clearing before the tent fires burned on altars piled up from rocks. All who came to pay tribute to the

great kagan were to pass between these fires. "By fire," the shamans explained, "criminal designs are cleansed and the evil spirits who bring sickness and misfortune and hover invisibly around malefactors are driven away."

The old head shaman Beki and four young shamans in conical felt hats and loose white robes walked around the altars beating large tambourines with their palms and shaking rattles. Amidst their howling they shouted out prayers, feeding the fires with resinous twigs and fragrant dried flowers.

To one side of the tent stood a white stallion named Seter tethered to a golden post. He had fiery eyes and a silvery white coat on a black hide. He had never known a saddle, and no man had ever mounted him. During the campaigns of Jenghiz Khan — according to the shamans' explanations — this snow-white steed bore the mighty and invisible god of war Sulde¹, the patron of the Mongol army, who led it to great victories.

To the other side of the tent, always saddled, stood the broad-chested Neiman, Jenghiz Khan's favorite battle steed, a sorrel with black legs and tail and a black stripe down its spine — a descendent of wild steppe horses.

Beside the horse Seter a tall bamboo staff was driven into the ground bearing the white banner of Jenghiz Khan.

A patrol of bodyguards, or *turgauds*, in armor and iron helmets was posted around the barrow to make sure that no living being approached the tent of the great kagan. Only those who possessed special gold plates — *paitzas* — bearing the image of a tiger's head could get past the outposts of turgaud sentries to come near the barrow with the yellow silk tent.

Some distance away, on the steppe, black Tatar yurts and reddish-brown woolen Tangut² tents stood scattered in a large ring. This was Jenghiz Khan's personal *kurien*³, the camp of his one thousand chosen bodyguards — warriors on white steeds. This guard included only the

¹*Sulde* — in the mythology of the Mongols, one of man's souls with which his vitality and spiritual strength are associated. Its material embodiment is the ruler's banner, in itself an object of veneration. To raise the army's morale in the time of war, human sacrifices were sometimes made to Sulde-the-Banner. — *Ed.*

²*Tanguts* — a people of the Tibeto-Burman group. The Tangut state of Si-Sa in northern China was laid to waste by the Mongols. — *Tr.*

³*Kurien* — a circle of yurts with that of the leader of the nomad camp in the center.

sons of the most distinguished khans; the kagan chose from among them the keenest and most loyal and put them in charge of detachments.

And farther still other kuriens stood scattered on the steppe: they stretched along the plain, reaching to the densely wooded mountains. Between kuriens camels and herds of multi-colored horses grazed. The horse tenders galloped about, whooping and twirling their lassos, keeping horses of different herds from mixing or approaching the mares with colts.

Before moving on the lands of the Muslims, the Mongol sovereign sent to Bukhara an embassy with lavish gifts for the Shah of Khorezm, Muhammad. At the head of the embassy he placed the loyal Muslim Mahmud-Yalvach, a wealthy merchant from Gurganj who had formerly dispatched caravans from Central Asia to China. He was to investigate the goings-on in the western lands, find out about the armies there and whether or not the Shah of Khorezm was prepared for war. At the same time Jenghiz Khan sent out a large number of secret scouts.

Chapter Two

THE EMBASSY OF THE EASTERN RULER

The aroma of flowers from faraway lands still remains in the folds of their garments.

From a Persian tale

Defeated Samarkand was made the temporary capital of the last shah of Khorezm. In commemoration of his victory over the unruly dwellers of Samarkand, Muhammad erected a high mosque there and started in on the construction of a large palace. He continued to think of himself as a great conqueror, who, like Iskender the Great, must march at the head of his loyal Kipchak troops to the ends of the universe and push the borders of the Khorezm shahs' domain to the Last Sea¹, beyond

¹At that time the earth was thought to be an island surrounded by a boundless sea.

which darkness reigned. He considered his principal and most dangerous adversary to be Nasir, the Caliph of Baghdad, for the latter's refusal to recognize Muhammad as the head of all Muslims. First he must rout Nasir and drive the tip of this spear into the sacred land of Baghdad before its central mosque, and then he would turn his steed and move east in order to conquer faraway China, renowned for its riches.

Muhammad put together a large army. Waving his green banner, he set out across Persia to Baghdad, the capital of the Arab caliphs.

However, the advance order of the shah's army, lacking warm clothing, soon perished in the mountains of Persia, caught in a blizzard; drained of its strength, it was slain by the infidel Kurds. This tragic event stopped Muhammad, and he began to doubt the necessity of a war with the caliph. "Could this be the wrath of Allah?" he wondered and returned to Bukhara, where he temporarily "laid aside his staff of wandering".

In the autumn of the Year of the Rabbit (1219) a large embassy arrived here from Jenghiz Khan, the great kagan of the Mongols, Tatars, Chinese and other peoples inhabiting the east. Once again the Khorezm Shah was forced to contend with the Tatars.

The emissaries of Jenghiz Khan — three Muslims from among the wealthiest merchants who annually sent caravans with goods from Khorezm to various regions of Asia — rode up to the high gates of the shah's palace on piebald steppe horses. These merchants, natives of three large cities — Gurganj, Bukhara and Otrar¹ — had long been in the service of Jenghiz Khan. Wealthy merchants such as these usually comprised trade companies and accepted money from investors who wished to try their luck in trade. Their orders for the payment of huge sums of money on trade deals were carried out everywhere

¹Prior to the Mongol invasion, the city of Otrar was one of the largest in Central Asia. In 1219 it was devastated by Jenghiz Khan, the inhabitants being slaughtered virtually to the last man. It was subsequently rejuvenated, and its name comes up in the history of Central Asia, but it was never able to attain its former wealth and populousness. Now it is a huge sprawl of banks and mounds beneath which lie the ruins of a city that gradually fell into decay.

without delay, in the remote east and far west alike, and payments on these orders traveled faster than tributes to state treasuries.

Gifts for Khorezm Shah Muhammad were brought on a hundred camels and one brightly painted bullock cart drawn by two long-haired yaks. People thronged the street from the shah's country residence, where the embassy was being quartered, to the gates of the shah's palace. The merchants' smart-looking shop assistants, dressed in identical robes made of Chinese silk, removed the packs from the camels, opened them up and carried the extraordinarily rare gifts into the reception hall of the palace.

Among the gifts were bars of valuable metals of an unknown color, rhinoceros horns, pouches of musk, red and pink coral, carved cups of jasper and jade; pieces of the precious fabric *targu*, woven from the hair of white camels and given only to khans; silk fabrics sewn with gold, pieces of cloth as thin and transparent as gossamer. At last the assistants brought in an enormous hunk of gold from the mountains of China, the size of a camel's neck. The gold had come on the cart drawn by the yaks.

The Khorezm Shah received the emissaries sitting on the high, age-old throne of the Sultan Osman, the last in the line of Karakhanids. The shah wore brocade clothes, as did the retinue that surrounded him; he sat pensive and indifferent, his eyes half-closed. His gaze was fixed on something over the heads of those who had gathered there. Beside the throne stood the grand vizier, and other high officials crowded around.

The three emissaries bowed to the ground, then knelt before the shah and told him the purpose of their visit. The head emissary, the tall and portly Mahmud-Yalvach, began:

"The great Jenghiz Khan, ruler of all Mongols, dispatched this extraordinary embassy in order to tie the knots of friendship, peace and goodneighborliness. The great kagan sends the Khorezm Shah gifts and his greetings and asked us also to proclaim these words..." Mahmud-Yalvach handed one of the other emissaries a parchment scroll tied with a white ribbon bearing a blue wax seal.

The second emissary, Ali Hoja al-Bukhari, read:
"I know your power and the vast extent of your empi-

re. I am aware of the fact that Your Majesty the Shah is revered in the majority of states of the universe. Therefore I consider it my duty to strengthen the ties of friendship with you, the Shah of Khorezm, for you are to me as dear as my most cherished son¹ —”

“‘Son’! Did I hear you say ‘son’!” cried the shah, snapping to attention. He rested his hand on the ivory hilt of the dagger in his belt and, leaning forward, glared at the speaking emissary.

“...In the same way, you must know,” the emissary went on undaunted, “that I have conquered the kingdom of China, having seized its most important northern capital, and have annexed that part of the lands which neighbors your domain...”

The shah shook his head and began curling the tip of his black beard around the finger with the diamond ring. “...You know as well as anyone that the land belonging to me is a veritable forge of warriors and a mine of silver. My vast lands produce all kinds of goods in abundance. Thus there is no need for me to venture beyond my borders with the aim of winning spoils for myself. Great Shah, if you recognize as beneficial each of us opening up our lands for free passage to merchants of our respective countries, this will be advantageous to us both, and we will both find great satisfaction in this.”

The three emissaries waited in silence for the reply of the ruler of western Muslim countries to the letter of the sovereign of the nomadic east. The Khorezm Shah continued to sit motionless. Glancing at the grand vizier, he made a lazy gesture with his hand, adorned with gold bracelets.

The grand vizier received Jenghiz Khan’s message solemnly. He raised his eyes to Muhammad, who waved his hand again, as if shooing away an annoying fly. Then the vizier bowed and said quietly to the head emissary Mahmud-Yalvach, “The imperial reception is over. The padishah will now render his grace upon others, receiving urgent suppliants.”

The three emissaries rose and backed respectfully to

¹According to eastern custom of that time, the ruler of one state could be referred to as son only if he was in a position of subordination and vassal dependence to the other ruler.

the door, then walked into the next hall. Here they were overtaken by the vizier, who whispered to Mahmud-Yalvach, "Await me at midnight!"

Chapter Three

THE NOCTURNAL TALK BETWEEN THE SHAH AND THE EMISSARY

Do not say you are strong or you will come upon one stronger. Do not say you are clever or you will come upon one more clever.

A Kirghiz saying

That night a taciturn servant accompanied Mahmud-Yalvach from the shah's country residence, where the Mongol emissaries were staying. Horses were waiting for them beneath an old plane tree. By the light of the moon Mahmud-Yalvach recognized the grand vizier among the horsemen.

"Follow me," he said. "Climb on the horse."

They rode through hushed Bukhara along dark alleys and stopped near a solid wall with an iron door. At the sound of a coded knock the door opened noiselessly. Behind it stood a sombre warrior in a helmet and mail, who by the light of the moon appeared to be cast from silver. Mahmud-Yalvach followed the vizier across a garden with pools, where swans dozed and the whisper of female voices could be heard in arbors above the water.

They climbed to the terrace of a quaint arbor. Behind a heavy curtain was a small room, upholstered with patterned fabric. Thick wax candles burned and crackled in the tall silver candelabra. Shah Muhammad sat on silk pillows in a bright robe of cashmere.

"Sit closer!" said the shah once he had heard his guest's salutations. "I wish to speak with you in private about business of much importance to me. You are one of my subjects, for are you not from Khorezm, from my city of Gurganj? You are a true-believing Muslim and not some filthy heathen, and now you must prove to me that you are on the side of all true believers in spirit, mind and deed, and have not sold yourself to the enemies of Islam."

"This is all true, my padishah! I am from Gurganj,"

replied Mahmud-Yalvach, kneeling at Muhammad's feet. "I listen with respect and trepidation to the words of Your Majesty and am glad to give all my life in service of the ruler of Islamic lands."

"If you answer all my questions truthfully, I will reward you generously. Here is a token to prove to you that I will uphold my promise." The shah pulled a large pearl from his gold bracelet and handed it to the emissary. "But remember that if you are found to be a liar and a traitor, you will not live to see tomorrow's sun."

"What must I do? I shall obey, padishah!"

"I want to find out everything about the Tatar kagan Jenghiz Khan through you. I want you to serve as my eyes and my ears in his presence. I want you to send me letters with a trustworthy person, informing me in good time what Jenghiz Khan is doing, what designs he has and where he is planning to march his troops. Swear that you will carry this out!"

"As Allah is my witness, I serve and shall serve you, my padishah!" said Mahmud-Yalvach and touched his beard.

"You will stay here another day in order to tell my chronicler Mirza-Yusuf all that you know about Jenghiz Khan: where he is from, what wars he has waged and how he came to be the sovereign of all the Tatars."

"I shall tell this, my lord!"

"Jenghiz Khan claims that he is now the ruler of the mighty China and that he has even captured its capital. Is this really so, or is all this mere boasting?"

"I swear this is the very truth!" replied Mahmud. "A matter of such great importance cannot remain secret. Soon, my lord, you will have no doubt that all this is true."

"Assuming even that this is so," said the shah, "you know the vastness of my domain and the great numbers of my troops, do you not? Then how dare that braggart, that pagan cattle-breeder call me, the mighty ruler of all Muslims, his son?.." The shah seized the emissary by the shoulders with his strong hands and pulled him forward, glaring at him fixedly. "Speak now, how strong is his army?"

Mahmud sensed hidden rage in the Khorezm Shah's words. Fearing his wrath and punishment, he folded his

hands on his chest and answered with deferential meekness, "In comparison to your innumerable victorious troops, the army of Jenghiz Khan is no more than a trickle of smoke in the darkness of the night!.."

"Exactly!" exclaimed the shah and shoved the emissary away. "My troops are countless and invincible! The universe knows this, and you have explained all this to me well... In a day I will give you my reply to the Tatar padishah. And you and your Mongol companions in trade shall have all the privileges and advantages for the selling and purchasing of goods as well as the right of free passage through Muslim territories. And now go with my vekil; he will take you to the round room where my chronicler, old Mirza-Yusuf, awaits you."

The Khorezm Shah nodded graciously and clapped his hands in summons of someone.

Chapter Four

WHAT THE EMISSARY TOLD OF JENGHIZ KHAN

One must not speak ill of someone in his absence,
for the earth can convey all this to him.

An Eastern saying

The vekil indicated to the Mongol emissary to follow him and led him down the crooked and windy passages of the palace to a round room with a high dome. Black trunks stood near the walls, bound in iron. On shelves in narrow niches lay dusty paper scrolls.

"The shah's library!" Mahmud-Yalvach concluded, somewhat relieved. He had expected to find himself in a torture chamber for questioning.

On the carpet sat a withered, bent old man with a snow-white beard and rheumy eyes. Beside him a young scribe with the sweet, comely face of a girl sat bent over a stack of paper.

The vekil, alleging urgent duties, took his leave.

The emissary, tall and burly in a skillfully wound turban and a red silk robe, left his green shoes at the entrance and walked slowly toward the old man, who had

risen with words of salutation. Having received an invitation, the emissary knelt down. The two men whispered a prayer, drew their hands down their beards and exchanged inquiries about each other's health.

The emissary began, "The great padishah ordered me to tell you all I know about the Tatar sovereign. I usually serve him as an interpreter, but now I am performing the duties of an emissary..."

"I am listening to you with undivided attention, our honorable and rare guest. My great padishah ordered the same of me: to learn from you information useful to our homeland and record everything I hear in the secret palace book of chronicles."

Mahmud-Yalvach lowered his eyes and was silent for some time. "Everything I say," he thought, "will become known to all the palace gossips in a matter of days. How can I avoid danger on both the side of the shah, who will be furious if I say nothing of importance, and that of the great Tatar kagan, who will surely learn of this nocturnal conference? Jenghiz Khan's spies are everywhere..."

The emissary assumed a sad, distraught expression and began fingering the mother-of-pearl rosary wound round his left hand.

"I shall tell you of many things which defy reason," he said, "so far removed are they from all that is customary. Even I do not always believe the truth of these stories... But if I say they are all lies, you nonetheless will wish to know what kind of lies they are. Therefore I shall say that which I have heard. All people err. If someone claims to have attained infallibility, then there is no point in even talking to him!.."

Mahmud-Yalvach stopped and, raising his brows, watched with amazement at how quickly the young scribe recorded his words. The reed pen skittered lightly across the paper, and word after word lay down in an even line, inscribed in handsome Arabic ligature.

"Why is that boy recording everything? I have not even begun to speak about the Tatars yet!"

"That is not a boy," replied the scribe Mirza-Yusuf. "That is the girl Bent-Zankija... I have begun to lose my sight, and my hands tremble. So my granddaughter has taken to helping me. She writes so easily and beautifully — like the finest Arab calligrapher. But I am not certain that

this girl will continue to be my helper for long. She is already composing songs about 'the joy of dark eyes' and 'a mole on the cheek', therefore I fear she will soon leave me... Then I shall have to fold my hands on my chest and lie down with my face to the Sacred Stone¹ ..."

"I shall not leave you, grandfather!" she said without raising her eyes or interrupting her writing.

The old man addressed the emissary once again, "The padishah promises you a great reward for everything you say, for everything of importance that is useful for us to know. It would be regrettable if due to our carelessness the country of Islam were suddenly to fall prey to mighty enemies! For you are a true believer, as are we all! Will you be able to caution us in time? A great reward awaits you..."

"I need nothing!" said the emissary with a sigh. "May the reward for all the trouble I have endured in my wanderings about the universe be the prayers said for me by pious Muslims in order that I might live forever!"

An ironic smile twisted the girl's mouth. She threw a distrustful glance at the emissary, at his sated body and the gold rings on his fingers. The emissary remained silent, pondering his every word.

"May it be so!" the old scribe said sympathetically.

A lean slave servant with long white hair brought in a silver platter with various sweets and placed it before the guest. He filled a silver goblet with dark-red wine from a clay jug.

"Sample this aged wine from the palace cellar," said the scribe. "The first thing of importance to us is to know what kind of a people these Mongols and Tatars are. Where do they live? How many of them are there? What kind of warriors are they? They have appeared on our borders so suddenly, like the terrible Yajuji and Majuji hurled from the fiery bowels of the earth by the cunning Iblis²."

The emissary explained, "Both the Mongols and the Tatars are people of the steppe; they live side by side in

¹The Sacred Stone or Black Stone is the most venerated Muslim object, housed in the Kaaba in the Great Mosque of Mecca. It is believed by pilgrims to have magical powers.

²*Iblis* — the spirit of evil, perfidy and darkness mentioned in the Koran.

the remote countries of the east and are not accustomed to a stationary way of life. Their vast lands comprise a desert, abundant in grass and lacking in water, suited to the horse, the sheep and the camel, because this livestock consumes much grass and little water..."

The scribe interrupted the emissary, "It is important for us to know if they pose a threat to us as an army."

"I would be a traitor to Islam and a genuine liar were I to say that the Mongols and the Tatars are less threatening to their neighbors than the terrible Yajuji and Majuji..."

"May Allah preserve us!" exclaimed the old Mirza-Yusuf.

"They are natural-born warriors; they have been at war with one another for a hundred years, one tribe against the next... Today some Tatar khan has a thousand horses, an enormous herd of sheep and a hundred half-naked shepherds always hungry, always discontent, because each shepherd has a hungry wife and hungry children... When the khan sees that life has become unbearable for his shepherds and they have begun to roar like beasts, he orders them, 'Come, let us wage war against the neighboring tribe! We will return sated and rich!' The khan sets out with his shepherds into battle... And the carnage sometimes ends with this khan in stocks being sold along with his livestock and shepherds for four dirhams a head. They are bought by a third neighboring tribe or merchant slave-traders —"

"Why are you telling us all this?" the scribe asked reproachfully. "It is important for us to learn not about slaves or other such trifles, but about the army of the Tatar khan, about their weapons, about the number and military skills of his warriors!"

The emissary sipped his wine leisurely.

"In order to reach the mountain," he said, "sometimes one must first cross rivers, lakes and salt-marshes —"

"Honorable guest, tell us first not of salt-marshes, but of the Tatar padishah."

"What fine, aromatic wine have the cellars of the Khorezm Shah!" Mahmud-Yalvach went on unperturbed. "I wish him a reign without grief till the end of his days... Among the belligerent Tatar khans, one by the name of Temujin distinguished himself for his particular success in battle, his cruelty toward his enemies, generosi-

ty toward his allies and ardency in assaults. This Khan Temujin had seen his share of misfortune. They say that as a boy Temujin was forced into slavery and, with a pillory round his neck, he carried out the most grueling work in the smithy of an enemy tribe¹. But he escaped, having killed the guard with his shackles, and then spent many years at war, striving for power over other khans... He was already fifty years old when the khans declared him the great kagan and lifted him on the 'white felt of honor' in the hopes that Temujin would carry out the wishes of the most distinguished khans... But Temujin subordinated all to his will, chose a new name for himself — Jenghiz Khan, which means 'sent by the skies' — routed and committed to slavery disobedient tribes, and boiled their chiefs alive in caldrons..."

"How awful!" the scribe sighed. "But you are telling terrible tales, and do not speak about the army of the great sovereign of the Tatars!"

The emissary drank another goblet of wine, and the scribe looked at him apprehensively. "The palace wine is strong... Will the emissary manage to tell everything the Khorezm Shah needs to know before he falls asleep?" But the lean old servant filled the silver goblet once more.

"It is precisely of the army that I speak," the emissary retorted calmly. "From the day that Jenghiz Khan was declared the great kagan, all the Tatars who had formerly warred became a single army, obedient to his will. He personally divided the Tatars into thousands, hundreds and tens and personally assigned them commanders, rejecting high-born khans if they did not enjoy his trust. He also proclaimed a new law, made known by heralds, that no nomad may fight another nomad, rob or deceive another nomad, and for any of these crimes there would be one punishment — death!"

"Does this law of Jenghiz Khan's permit the robbery and deception of people of another tribe, other than the Tatar one?"

"Absolutely!" said the emissary. "This is even considered especially commendable and valorous: to rob, cheat or kill a man of another, not the Tatar, tribe."

¹In his youth Jenghiz Khan lived in poverty and deprivation, was taken prisoner by a neighboring tribe and spent three years carrying out slave labor.

"I see," whispered the scribe. "And what did the simple herdsmen have to say? Did their hunger wane?"

"Jenghiz Khan proclaimed that the tribes subordinate to him comprised the sole people in all the universe, chosen by the skies, that from then on they would bear the name 'Mongols', which means 'victors'... All other peoples on earth must become the slaves of the Mongols. Any tribes disobedient to Jenghiz Khan would be wiped from the face of the earth, and only the Mongols would remain living."

The scribe wrung his hands.

"Does this mean that the Tatar kagan has come to our border too with the demand that all true believers submit to him? But our padishah has an enormous army of brave warriors who fight like lions under the sacred green banner of Islam... Why, it is madness to think that such a valorous Muslim army and a commander as renowned as the Khorezm Shah Alla ed-Din Muhammad will submit to the crazed khan of simple herdsmen! It is like believing a child's fairy tale. The sacred shadow of the Prophet himself hovers over our army and leads it to victory!"

The emissary folded his puffy hands on his potbelly, sighed and closed his eyes.

"I warned you that you would call my stories fables and tales!"

"Oh no, honored guest! Speak on! I am listening to you, though all that you say is so unusual, so incredible."

The emissary sat up. The girl saw his eyes flash with wit and vigor, but he closed them again as if tired and went on languidly, "The Tatar kagan saw that the greediness of the khans did not decline, that the hunger and need of the simple shepherds grew, that the Tatar people had stored up the strength they had formerly spent fruitlessly in mutual carnage... Therefore, in order to keep the simple herdsmen from rising up against their khans, Jenghiz Khan decided to direct this amassed strength elsewhere... He summoned a *kurultai*¹ of distinguished khans and said to them, 'Soon you will embark on a great campaign. You will return from war laden with gold, driving herds of horses, livestock and a multitude of the most skilled slaves. The poorest of our shepherds will

¹*Kurultai* – a council restricted to the most distinguished feudal lords of the ruling family and principal military leaders.

have plenty to eat, I shall wrap their bellies in precious silks and give each one several slave girls. We shall conquer the wealthiest of countries, and you will return so rich that you will not have pack animals enough to haul the spoils back to your yurts...' In the spring, when the steppe became green with fine pasture, Jenghiz Khan led his hungry cavalry to the ancient and wealthy lands of China... He crushed all the Chinese troops along his way, he soared like a blizzard across the country, burning thousands of Chinese towns to cinders, and only after three years of war, having conquered half of China, did he return to the steppes, loaded down with immeasurable spoils..."

"May Allah guard us from this!" whispered the scribe.

"All that I have said again seems a fairy tale to you, but nevertheless it is true!"

"Tell me please, honorable Mahmud-Yalvach, what is he like in appearance, this extraordinary commander Jenghiz Khan?"

"He is tall in stature, and though he is more than sixty years old, he is still quite hearty. With his heavy gait and awkward ways he is like a bear; in cunning he is like a fox; in malice, a snake; in precipitation, a leopard; in endurance, a camel; in generosity toward those he wishes to reward he is like a bloodthirsty tigress fondling her cubs. He has a high brow, a long thin beard and yellow, unblinking eyes like a cat's. All the khans and ordinary warriors fear him more than fire and thunder, and if he orders ten soldiers to attack a thousand enemies, the soldiers will charge ahead without the slightest hesitation, for they believe they will be victorious — Jenghiz Khan always gains the victory..."

"I have lived many years," said the scribe, "and have seen many glorious, brave commanders, but never have I met anyone the likes of whom you now describe... Your story is much like a fairy tale... Explain to me if you can why the Tatar kagan, having made every shepherd rich, has now suddenly appeared on our border, so far away from his homeland?"

The emissary finished his goblet of wine, closed his eyes once again and swayed noticeably. The scribe cast a stern glance at the servant and made a forbidding gesture when he saw he was about to refill the goblet. But the emissary came out of his drowsy state and, seeing his

silver goblet empty, made a sign to the servant, who filled the goblet to the brim once more with the dark-red wine.

“Do not wonder that I drink so much! Neither you, honorable Mirza-Yusuf, nor your young helper have drunk a drop, thus I am left to drink for three...”

Mahmud went on, holding his goblet in his hands and swaying slightly, “The great kagan rested in his nomad camps for three years. He left half his army in China, where the people continue to this day to defend their homeland. And the other half he himself led west across deserts and mountains...”

The scribe covered his ears and groaned.

“I sense something awful!..”

The emissary resumed his story, “The greediness of the khans and the hunger of the simple nomads are beyond all measure. The warriors complained that the khans took the best of the spoils for themselves, leaving nothing but dregs for the poor. Then Jenghiz Khan decided to take his warriors farther away to keep them from butchering one another and the khans once more...”

“And how great is the Tatar army now?”

The emissary said in a sleepy, listless voice, “Jenghiz Khan led eleven *tumens* to the west. Each *tumen* contains ten thousand Tatar horsemen, and each horseman leads with him a second, reserve horse, if not two...”

“This means the Tatar kagan has but one hundred ten thousand horsemen?!” the scribe exclaimed. “While our padishah has four times that number!.. If he rouses all our tribes for a holy war, the enormous army of Islam will be utterly invincible!”

“Did I not say the same thing to His Majesty, the Khorezm Shah Alla ed-Din Muhammad? Compared to the army of the padishah Muhammad – may he reign one hundred twenty years – the Tatar army is no more than a trickle of smoke in the darkness of the night!.. True, along the way, during his march to the west, all the wanderers of the steppe joined the Tatar army: Uigurs and Altais and Kirghiz and Kara-Kitais, so that the Tatar army of Jenghiz Khan rapidly grew and swelled... This is no tale!”

The emissary swayed, put his hands down on the carpet and stretched out. The girl put a green morocco pillow under his head and whispered to old Mirza-Yusuf,

"He is a sly fox! He does not wish to tell the truth..."

"Such are emissaries! Where can you find one who is frank and straightforward?"

In came the vekil. For a long time all three sat in silence, waiting and knowing not what to do with the dozing emissary.

All at once Mahmud-Yalvach woke up and got hurriedly to his feet, muttering his apologies, "What I have told you in this drunken state I myself cannot recall! You should not have recorded all this. Better to burn these notes!..."

The vekil led the emissary back along the dark narrow passages of the palace to the garden gate where the horses awaited him. With some difficulty the jigits managed to put the swaying Mahmud-Yalvach in the saddle. In the pre-dawn twilight the horsemen rode through the hushed streets of slumbering Bukhara back to the shah's country residence.

A day later, having personally received a reply from Shah Muhammad, the Tatar embassy set out again for the east, to the camp of the great kagan of all the Tatars.

Chapter Five

THE GREAT KAGAN HEARS THE REPORT

Jenghiz Khan was notably tall and powerful in stature. He had cat-like eyes.

Historian Juzjani, 13th century

Three horsemen rode swiftly along the road among the Tatar yurts. Their woolen cloaks billowed out like the wings of fighting eagles. Two sentries crossed their spears. The horsemen dismounted, throwing their dusty cloaks on the white sand.

One of the three straightened his red striped robe and cried, "Blessed be the name of the kagan. A dispatch of special importance!"

Two nukers in blue coats with red stripes on the sleeves were already running from a nearby yurt.

"We have arrived from a western country where we traveled as emissaries of the great kagan. Inform him of our arrival. I am the emissary Mahmud-Yalvach."

Inside the yellow tent a silk curtain was pulled aside a little and a command was issued from within. Eight sentries along the road to the tent repeated one after another, "The great kagan's order: 'Let them pass.'"

The three emissaries bowed; their hands folded on their chests, they set out toward the tent. A Chinese servant admitted them; they went inside without raising their heads and knelt on the carpet.

"Speak!" a low voice said.

Mahmud-Yalvach raised his eyes. He saw the stern dark face with the red shaggy beard. Two grey braids tied up in knots fell on his broad shoulders. Greenish-yellow eyes stared fixedly out from under a laquered black hat with a huge emerald.

"The Shah of Khorezm Alla ed-Din Muhammad is very pleased with your gifts and your proposal of friendship. He readily agreed to grant your merchants privileges of all kinds. But he became angry —"

"That I called him my son?"

"As always, Great One, you have guessed correctly. The shah flew into such a rage that I could easily have lost my head."

The kagan's eyes narrowed into thin slits.

"You thought you would get this?" the kagan made a horizontal line in the air with his fat finger.

Everyone feared this gesture: it was Jenghiz Khan's way of sentencing someone to death.

"I checked the wrath of the Shah of Khorezm, and he sends you 'salam' and a letter."

"You checked his wrath? How?" There was a note of mistrust in the kagan's voice. His eyes stared, widened, then narrowed again.

Mahmud-Yalvach began telling him at length about his reception at Shah Muhammad's and about how the grand vizier had come to him in the middle of the night and summoned him for a secret council with the shah. As he spoke he placed on Jenghiz Khan's wide palm the pearl he had received from the Khorezm Shah and gave a detailed account of everything he and Muhammad had discussed.

Mahmud-Yalvach felt without raising his eyes that the kagan was staring fixedly at him, trying to penetrate his hidden thoughts.

"Is this all that you heard?"

"If I have forgotten something, forgive me my incapacities!"

They heard a soft snort: the kagan was pleased. He brought his heavy hand down on Mahmud-Yalvach's shoulder.

"You are a sly Muslim, Mahmud. It was clever of you to say that my army is like a trickle of smoke in the darkness of a black night. Let the shah think just this! Come all three tonight and sup with me."

The emissaries left the tent.

The kagan rose, tall, round-shouldered, in black clothing made of rough canvas, drawn with a wide gold belt. Stepping heavily with his large clumsy feet in white suede boots, he crossed the tent, pulled the curtain aside and watched as the three emissaries in white turbans and brightly colored robes mounted their dusty horses and rode slowly away.

"The time of the great campaign has drawn near. I shall await a lucky moon."

Chapter Six

JENGHIZ KHAN'S TROUBLED NIGHT

Jenghiz Khan did not like to sleep on cots heated by a long flue like the ones the pampered Chinese slept on, nor the feather beds common among the Muslim merchants. The kagan liked to feel solid ground beneath him, and the old Chinese servant made his master's bed on the carpet from nothing but a well pressed piece of thick felt folded in two.

The kagan usually fell right to sleep. He often dreamt and made the shamans or his wise advisor, the Chinaman Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai¹ explain the meaning of these dreams,

¹While conquering the capital in China, Jenghiz Khan was introduced to Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai, a descendent of the formerly ruling Khitan dynasty. Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai was renowned for his education, poetry, knowledge of Chinese law and court ceremonies. It was as an astrologist and reader of the future by the stars that Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai won the favor of the superstitious Jenghiz Khan. Jenghiz Khan appointed him his principal advisor in ruling the subjugated territories, and Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai became an outstanding figure of the Mongol empire. He was known for his modest material requirements, his honesty and his ability to calm Jenghiz Khan's wrath. After his death no riches were found among Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai's personal effects — only books and astronomical instruments.

but he did not always trust their explanations and acted at his own discretion anyway. Having awoken at dawn, lying beneath a warm sable cloak, the kagan would ponder over his tens of thousands of soldiers and horses, about the best route along which the local inhabitants would be able to feed his insatiable army, about the upkeep of his five hundred wives left behind in Mongolia with their children, slaves and servants. He would also mull over the reports of the numerous spies he had sent out ahead of time to the lands he planned to attack; he would think about his sons, envious and resentful of one another; he would think about the pains in his legs and joints, and about death too...

The kagan opened his unblinking eyes, which lacked upper lashes, and fixed his gaze on one spot. He stared at the crack between two parts of the tent. A patch of sky shone blue there. The stars were already fading. The shadow of the nukur sentry showed black as he paced slowly back and forth.

One discomfiting thought kept coming back to the kagan. On the eve of his march on the west, Jenghiz Khan's fat old wife Burte had, as always, spoken words of wisdom to him.

"Great Kagan," she said bowing her head to the ground and breathing heavily, "you will go with your army beyond mountains and deserts to unknown lands, into terrible battles with other peoples. Has it occurred to you that an enemy arrow might pierce your mighty heart or the sword of a foreign warrior shatter your helmet of steel? If this brings about the dreadful and irreversible" — she was thinking but did not dare mention the word "death" — "and if in place of yourself only your sacred name will remain on earth, then which of our four sons will you want to be your successor and ruler of the universe? Declare your will to all in good time so that war and fratricide will not arise among our sons."

Before that time no one had ventured to so much as hint at his age, at the fact that his days might already be numbered. Everyone maintained that he was great, unchanging and irreplaceable, that the universe would collapse without him. Only faithful old Burte had dared mention death...

Or had he indeed grown feeble? No, he would show

them yet, all those who secretly envied him, that he could still leap onto an unsaddled horse, spear a wild boar at full tilt, and stop an assassin, strangling him with his own strong hands. He would deal cruelly with all who ventured to speak of his weakness or old age...

But brave, wise Burte had nonetheless been correct in mentioning an heir. Which of his four sons would he name his successor? His eldest son, indomitable and self-willed Juchi, desired his father's death most of all. He was forty already and no doubt longing to snatch the reins of power from Jenghiz Khan, putting his father in a yurt for feeble old men. Therefore he had sent his son Juchi far away, to the farthest corner of his empire, and appointed secret informers to watch him and report his every move and intention...

His second son, Jagatai, wanted the death of his brother and rival Juchi more than that of his father. As long as the two hated and fought each other, they presented no danger. So he had decided to declare his third son Ugedei his successor; he had a gentle, light-hearted disposition, liked gay feasts, hunting with falcons, riding... He would not plot or scheme against his own father. Such also was the fourth and youngest son, Tule Khan. The two of them both liked carousing; they were not consumed by a lust for power.

Therefore, setting out on the campaign, Jenghiz Khan had declared his third son Ugedei heir to the throne. But in so doing he had further angered his two elder sons, and must now be constantly on his guard, ready for an attack, a poisoned arrow shot from the darkness, or a spear piercing the curtain of his tent...

Since then the indignant Juchi had always been far away, in front of the army, at the head of the *tumen* assigned to him. He tried to distinguish himself, win the love of his warriors; he sought glory. He was young and strong... Oh to be young!..

Tossing and turning, the kagan often recalled the words of fat old Burte and thought about his death. He thought about the high barrow in the steppe where slender saigas¹ with curved horns roamed, where eagles circled slowly high up in the sky... In barrows like this the remains of great men lay buried. Even the mightiest rulers

¹*Saiga* — a steppe antelope.

of nations had always died eventually. But he, Jenghiz Khan, was the mightiest of all. For no one had conquered territories so vast before. What was death? There were said to be scholarly healers, magicians and witch-doctors who knew of a stone that turned iron to gold. They could also prepare an elixir that brought back youth, boil from ninety-nine herbs a precious medicine that rendered immortality...

Had not he, the simple noker Temujin, a former slave with a pillory round his neck been proclaimed the "envoy of the skies" Jenghiz Khan at the kurultai? If the blue skies were eternal, then so must be he, their envoy. He would have his great Chinese advisor Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai send strict orders immediately, the very next day, to all corners of the empire for the most scholarly sages capable of working miracles to come to the kagan's headquarters without delay — Chinese seekers of truth, Tibetan witch-doctors, Altai shamans — and to bring with them medicines which gave strength, youth and immortality. For such miraculous medicines he, the great kagan, would give them an unprecedented reward, the likes of which no ruler in all the universe had ever given...

He could not fall asleep for a long time. He tossed and turned and had just begun to doze off when suddenly he felt a slight pain in his big toe. Something had pinched him. He was not startled. He knew that signal of the nomads. The kagan raised his head slightly but could make nothing out in the darkness. He remembered this signal well: when still a youth he had squeezed the toe of his beloved bride Burte, then slender and lithe like a desert jerboa. Back then the whole family had slept together on felt mats in the dark yurt of her stern father Dai-Sechen.

Who was crouching at his feet? Who was summoning him?

He put out his hand cautiously and felt delicate silk clothing, a female form shrinking under his touch, narrow shoulders and an unusual hairdo. Who could it be? He drew her near and heard her quietly whispering in incorrect, broken speech:

"Your Kyusyultyu, your desired, Kulan-Khatun, prepare die, your come... Your comfort... You sun, Kyusyultyu moon..."

It was the Chinese woman, the servant of his young wife Kulan-Khatun, whom he called "Kyusyultyu". She had crept into the tent noiselessly, like a mouse. His wife was summoning him.

The kagan pulled on his big, felt-lined boots, made his way carefully to the door, trying not to disturb his two sons, Ugedei and Tule, who slept beside him, and went out of the tent.

Chapter Seven

IN KULAN-KHATUN'S YURT

You'll see — there are no beauties more fair!
Their eyes are narrow, and like they are
To the eyes of a furious lynx.

From a Mongol song

The quiet night breathed cold from the snowy mountains. The moon disappeared behind thick clouds. Here and there occasional stars twinkled dully. The Chinese woman walked ahead, and the gentle aroma of blossoming jasmine lingered behind her.

Two shadows rose from the ground.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"'Black Irtysh'..." whispered the Chinese woman.

"'Conquered universe,'" the sentry answered the password and the shadows parted to let them pass.

Approaching the white yurt the kagan thought, "What new caprice will Kyusyultyu show today?" Every time he came to her, interrupting talks with military commanders, she greeted him differently: once she was dressed like a Chinese girl in silk clothes embroidered with unusual flowers, another time she lay sighing beneath a sable cover, swearing she was dying, and asked him to place his mighty hand on her little heart, and yet another time she sat clasping her head in her hands, sobbing, as she listened to an old Mongol woman sing ancient Mongol songs about the green banks of the Kerulen¹ and the lone

¹*Kerulen* and *Onon* — tributaries of the Argun, the principal rivers of the "Mongol heartland" on whose banks Jenghiz Khan spent his youth.

nomad camp amidst the boundless barren desert.

The Chinese woman lifted the curtain at the entrance to the white yurt, and the kagan stepped inside. At the center of the yurt a fire burned on the roots of the desert brush, and a fragrant smoke curled up toward the opening in the round roof. Kulan-Khatun sat hugging her knees, staring with motionless squinting eyes at the leaping flames of the fire. In place of the usual silk rugs, three plain brightly colored felt mats lay on the ground. Off to one side bundles were packed up and tied, ready for the road.

The kagan stopped at the entrance. Merry sparks lit up in his shiny cat-like eyes. "There it is, the new caprice!" he thought.

Kulan-Khatun came out of her reverie and drew her palm across her eyes, their brows blackened and extended to her temples. She jumped up, threw her head back and prostrated herself before the kagan, hugging his feet.

"Forgive me, great one, irreplaceable one, the one and only for all ages, for disturbing your sleep, or your thoughts, or a military council. But I cannot stay here any longer. Death threatens me and my little son from everywhere, out of every crevice. I want to go away as a pauper, with one faithful servant, and roam the steppe where no one will recognize me."

"But wait, give me a cup of Chinese tea and I shall sit near you and listen while you tell me who threatens you and from where."

The kagan walked around the fire and sat down on a felt mat. What had happened to the silk rugs that had adorned the yurt? Where were the tapestries, embroidered with flowers and birds that had formerly hung on the walls? This was now the yurt of an ordinary simple nomad, the kind he himself had lived in forty years before.

Kulan again curled up into a ball and glanced at the kagan with the evil eyes of a furious lynx. Beside her lay her little son Kyulkan, naked and dark, with a cropped black head and two braids over his ears. She began in a plaintive, sing-song voice:

"I can rely on nothing, on no kind of protection. I have no father, no mother, and of all my brothers only one remains — he serves as a simple nuker, while he used

to have a thousand nukers of his own. And my brother too will soon die."

"Why should he die?"

"All of us Merkits, our whole miserable tribe, perished under the swords of your son's nukers — the son with the tiger eyes, your implacable, merciless son Juchi. Soon he will come here and I will always have in my presence the hateful murderer of my father and all our people. Why should I remain beneath a cliff that is ready to fall and crush me? Let me go! Everything is already packed for departure."

"Juchi Khan will not come here. He is on the banks of the river Irgiz preparing for a new campaign. And I am still alive, and continue to rule the universe. Of what protection other than my own do you speak?"

Kulan wiped her tear-filled eyes with her slender fingers.

"I shall put your brother, Jemal-Haji, in charge of a hundred of my nukers. Tomorrow I shall tell Chagan, the commander of my thousand nukers, that the sixth hundred with your brother in charge will guard you and your yurt and your little man Kyulkan. Who dares to fear when under the protection of my hand?"

Kulan dropped her eyes and said in a faint, quivering voice, "You too are threatened by arrows..."

"What arrows? Speak up — whose arrows?" The kagan put his hand on Kulan's shoulder.

She bit her lip, turned, wriggled free and, jumping up, scurried away. Her long black braid slithered like a snake along the felt mat. The kagan stepped on the end of the braid and said again in a whisper, "Speak — who is preparing my death?"

Kulan pressed back up against the frame of the yurt.

"Oh great, incomparable Kagan! You fear no peoples, no armies — you will destroy them as easily as a gust of wind sweeps away the autumn leaves. But can you guard yourself against secret enemies who sit with you in one tent, are at your side day and night? I alone am loyal to and love you like the mighty and magnificent mount of my beloved Altai, covered with sparkling snow. You alone are my protection, and without you I shall be cast aside like a pebble on the road. Do I not speak the truth? For you see all, you understand all — the speech of the

wind, the moaning of the oriole, the hissing of the snake. Is this not true, that which I say?"

"Tell me everything, everything you know," the kagan growled, without releasing the braid.

Malicious green sparks flared in Kulan-Khatun's eyes.

"The old men on the steppe wisely concluded that the heir, the keeper of the fire in the yurt should always be the youngest of the khan's sons. The elder sons grow up and are impatient to take hold of the reins of their father's steed. Therefore the father separates them and puts up their yurts far away from his own so that they might manage their own households. And while the youngest little son is growing up, the father can graze his herds in peace. You have given all of them gifts, granted all your sons *uluses*¹, so why have you forgotten to make your youngest son Kyulkan your successor?"

The kagan let go of the braid, chuckled for some time and said at last, "I am protecting the boy and you... Therefore I did not declare him my successor. The Mongols would never love or obey the son of a Merkit."

Kulan fell to her knees.

"But I am not afraid to love the one and only, the best in the world, the most remarkable of men, the son of a Merkit — you, my master, sent from the very skies, because your mother, the great Oyelun, was not of the Mongol race, but of the tribe of Merkits."

Jenghiz Khan rose with a grunt.

"You talk sense indeed! Everyone has forgotten about this. And better that they not remember... I shall cherish your words in my heart. Do not dare go anywhere. Spread the rugs out once again. After the military councils with the noyons I shall come to you, my little lynx, my desired one, my Kyusyultyu!"

And, stepping heavily, the kagan went out of the yurt.

Kulan rose and, furrowing her brow, she slowly and pensively wound her long black braid around her hand. She called for her servant. The Chinese woman was sleeping soundly, huddled up by the wall. Kulan woke her with a kick of her small foot and said, "That beast! Nearly broke my arm!.. Put the rugs back down! Weave another strand of horse hair into my braid — that savage

¹*Ulus* — an appanage, region.

nearly tore it off! Tomorrow there will be a great reception with foreign emissaries. Get out my blue Chinese dress embroidered with silver flowers..."

Chapter Eight

THE KAGAN COUNTS ON HIS FINGERS

The kagan strode quietly around the barrow, thinking about what the "furious lynx" had said. A shadow rose up before him once again. They exchanged passwords: "Black Irtysh!" "Conquered universe!" The kagan recognized in the sentry an old nuker who had accompanied him on all his forays.

"What have you heard? What have you seen?"

"There, in the distant mountains, many fires burn. See, like a necklace made of stars — those are the fires of the inhabitants of this plain who fled to the mountains with their herds. They fear our army."

"And what do the nukers say among themselves?"

"They say that we are eating the last of the sheep, that the horses have eaten all the grass and now merely nibble at the roots, that their swords crave blood. Therefore they say: the great kagan is wiser than we; he sees all, knows all, and soon he will lead us somewhere where there is plenty of everything for our bellies and our horses' bellies too."

"True! The kagan sees all, knows all, and will think of all. Go quickly to the head of the thousand, Chagan. Say that we command him to mount his steed without delay, taking with him six hundred nukers."

"I shall go now, my khan!"

"Wait! Tell Chagan also that I shall await him here on the barrow, before this meadow, counting on my fingers."

The Mongol, tottering on his bowed legs, ran down the hill, while the kagan squatted motionless, perking up his big ear and listening to the sounds that came out of the darkness. He began counting to himself, "One, two, three, four..." and when he had reached one hundred he held up one finger.

The moon rolled slowly across the sky, now wrapping

itself in a cloud, now creeping out into the dark sky again. Then the yurts of the nukers, spread out around the hill in a broad circle, came into sight, distinct and near, later to disappear into the shadow of a cloud and fade into indistinct patches.

When the kagan had counted to two hundred and held up a second finger, he caught sight of shadows dodging among the yurts, and several nukers galloped off into the foggy steppe. Guttural cries rang out across the whole camp, "Alarm!"

The kagan continued to sit motionless, calmly counting the third hundred, then the fourth... A hollow roar sounded in the distance; it grew louder, and the kagan realized that it was coming from a herd a thousand head strong. The herd raced closer and closer and stopped all at once at the foot of the hill. The sharp smell of horse's sweat reached the kagan, and a cloud of dust swirled up, shrouding the entire camp for an instant.

The kagan went on counting and holding up fingers. Neighing and the dull thuds of kicking horses carried up from the herd. The kagan roared in a low, raspy voice, "Chagan! Hey, Chagan!"

"Aye! I hear you!" came the drawn-out reply from the darkness.

"I have put up six fingers already. Why do you tarry?"

"Put up two more and we shall all be on our steeds!"

The moon drifted out of a cloud again and with its bright light illuminated the circle between the yurts, where the Mongols were running from all directions. Some were hauling saddles and saddle cloths, others were leading their horses to their yurts, and still others were racing to their previously assigned posts.

The kagan counted on. He put up the seventh finger and looked around at the sound of footsteps behind him. Two nukers led Jenghiz Khan's broad-chested sorrel, already saddled. Taking hold of its mane, he climbed into the saddle and set off slowly toward the crest of the hill. Behind him came seven nukers in a line; one bore a banner, its edges flapping in the wind.

Before the kagan a throng of horses and horsemen were still moving in all directions. But they all quickly assumed their respective positions, and before Jenghiz Khan had held up the eighth finger, six rows of horse-

men stretched in perfect order before him, a hundred in each row. At the fore was the head of a thousand, Chagan, and beside him several bodyguards.

"Chagan, come here!" cried Jenghiz Khan.

Chagan trotted up to the hill and stopped within three paces of the kagan.

"You will go to that mountain, where all the *harachu*¹ and long-eared hares of the desert cower. You will drive all their livestock back here and will not let a single sheep slip out of your hands. Charge!"

Chagan turned his horse around and galloped back to his men.

"Follow me!"

The detachment moved, row after row, hundred after hundred, turning onto the road made white by the light of the moon. The kagan remained motionless on the crest of the hill and went on counting and holding up fingers until the last horseman had vanished in the distant twilight. He held up the tenth finger.

"Has that arrogant braggart, the Shah of Khorezm, prepared such an army? We shall find out soon enough in the battle near Bukhara."

Chapter Nine

THE MISSING CARAVAN

Jenghiz Khan ordered his Muslim emissaries to rig up a large caravan and set out for the territories of the Khorezm Shah allegedly for the sale of goods. Jenghiz Khan conveyed to them a significant portion of his own valuables, plundered by him in China, and ordered them to use the money to buy as much fabric as possible, so that he might bestow it upon those who distinguished themselves.

Mahmud-Yalvach dispatched a multitude of goods with the caravan, but personally refused to go to Khorezm. He and his two companions lay in their yurts moaning, swearing they had been poisoned in Bukhara. The caravan consisted of five hundred camels accompanied by four

¹*Harachu* — the simple folk, the poor nomads.

hundred fifty men passing themselves off as merchants and their helpers. At the head of the caravan Jenghiz Khan placed his Mongol noker Usun.

Once across the mountainous spurs of the Tien Shan, the caravan arrived at the Muslim border city of Otrar. Here the caravan leader Usun showed the vicegerent of the town the charter, personally signed by Shah Muhammad and bearing his wax seal; in it the shah granted permission to the Mongol merchants to "travel and trade in all the towns of Khorezm unhindered and without any kind of duty".

The city of Otrar was known for its bazaars. In spring and autumn nomads came here from the remotest regions. They would drive their sheep and slaves here, bringing tanned hides, wool, various kinds of furs and rugs and trading them for fabric, boots, weapons, axes, scissors, needles and pins, cups, and copper and clay dishware. All this was manufactured by skilled craftsmen and their slaves in the towns of Maveran-nahr and Khorezm.

The caravan that arrived was extraordinary for the bazaars of Otrar. The merchants laid out on rugs strange and valuable things, the likes of which Otrar's inhabitants had never seen before. They came in throngs and marveled at the metal idols, so skillfully gilded that they seemed to be cast from gold, curved jasper staffs "for luck", vases, incense-burners and strange figurines made of jasper and jade, teapots and cups of delicate Chinese porcelain, swords with gold hilts and sheaths, studded with precious stones. Here one could find the furs of beavers and silver foxes, and men's and women's clothing made from heavy rustling silk lined with sable. There were other rare and valuable objects as well. People in the crowd talked among themselves:

"All these treasures were plundered by the Tatars in China, in the royal palaces. Spots of dried blood will probably turn up on these fine clothes. The Tatars sold the stolen things to the merchants for a song and the merchants want to resell them here for a hefty profit."

"Why does our army not go to China?" reasoned others. "Then we too could have such finery."

"If the Tatar merchants offer these luxurious goods for half the price, then what will be left for the Otrar

merchants to do? No one will so much as look at our goods."

The desert animal drovers shook their heads disapprovingly.

"Who needs such things? Only khans and beks and judges and great imams — for their robes. Now they will demand a double tax from us in order to finance the purchase of these fine clothes."

The vicegerent of the town of Otrar was Inalchik Kair Khan, nephew of the queen of Khorezm Turkan-Khatun. He rode through the bazaar with his retinue, stopped near the goods displayed by the Mongol caravan and accepted gifts from the merchants. Preoccupied, he then returned to the fortress and sent the Khorezm Shah a report in which he wrote:

"These people who arrived in Otrar in merchants' garb are not merchants at all but spies of the Tatar kagan. Their bearing is arrogant. One of the merchants, an Indian by extraction, insolently called me by name alone, without addressing me as 'khan', and I ordered him flogged. And the other merchants inquire of their customers about things that have no bearing on trade whatever. When they are left alone with someone from among the simple folk, they resort to threats, 'You have no suspicions about what goes on behind your back. Soon certain events will take place and you will be unable to fight them...' "

Alarmed by the letter, Khorezm Shah Muhammad ordered the Mongol caravan detained in Otrar. All four hundred fifty merchants and their helpers and the caravan leader Usun vanished without a trace in the fortress dungeon, and the vicegerent of Otrar sent the Mongol goods to Bukhara to be sold there. Khorezm Shah Muhammad took the profits for himself.

Of the entire caravan but one cameleer survived. He succeeded in escaping and making his way to the first Mongol post. There he was put on a mail horse with bells,¹ and he raced back to Jenghiz Khan with the terrible news.

¹Jenghiz Khan set up mail outposts along the main routes of his territories, where horses and messengers were always on hand to deliver the kagan's orders. Straps with bells were put on the horses' necks so that travelers would know to clear the road.

Chapter Ten

AN EMISSARY IS NOT STRANGLED, A MEDIATOR NOT KILLED

No sooner had the moon grown round, then shrunk back into a crescent once more, than a second emissary of the Tatar ruler arrived in Bukhara — Ibn-Kefrej-Bogra, whose father had once been an emir in the service of the Khorezm Shah's father Tekesh. He was accompanied by two distinguished Mongols.

Before receiving the emissaries, Khorezm Shah Muhammad held council with the Kipchak military chiefs. In accordance with their instructions he decided to receive the Mongols haughtily and coldly, but to hear them out nonetheless, in order to discover Jenghiz Khan's intentions.

The chief emissary entered with a raised head. He did not kneel, but spoke standing, as if ready for battle, though on the vekil's order he had left his weapon at the entrance.

"Sovereign of western countries!" he said. "We have come to remind you that our merchants who arrived in Otrar from Jenghiz Khan's lands had been issued a charter by you personally, signed by your hand and sealed with your seal. In it you gave our merchants permission to trade freely, and ordered all to treat them amiably. But you deceived them insidiously — they were all killed, their property plundered. While treachery is in itself a contemptible business, it becomes even more despicable when it proceeds from the head of Islam."

The Khorezm Shah roared, "Shameless creature! How dare you speak to me this way! How dare you accuse me of deeds that were carried out by my servant!"

"Great Shah! In other words, you hold that the vicerent of Otrar acted against your orders? Excellent! Then turn that criminal servant Inalchik Kair Khan over to us, and our great kagan will find fit punishment for him. But if you say no, then make ready for a war in which the most valorous will fall in battle and the well aimed Tatar spears will hit their targets!"

The Khorezm Shah grew pensive listening to these menacing words. Everyone froze, realizing that a decision was about to be made: would there or would there not be war. But a few arrogant Kipchak khans cried out:

"Death to this braggart! He dares to threaten us! Great padishah, do not forget that Inalchik Kair Khan is your mother's nephew! Surely you will not surrender him to be slaughtered by these infidels?! Order this impudent braggart killed, or we shall finish him off ourselves!.." The Khorezm Shah sat pale and grey, like a dead man. His lips quivered when he said softly, "No! I shall not surrender Inalchik Kair Khan, my loyal servant!"

Then one of the Kipchak khans walked up to the Mongol emissary, took hold of his beard, cut it off with one swipe and threw it in his face. Ibn-Kefrej-Bogra was a strong and brave man. But he did not fight back; he only cried, "In the sacred book it is written: an emissary is not strangled, a mediator not killed!"

The khans clamoured, "You are not an emissary, you are dust on the boot of the Tatar kagan! Why do you, a Muslim, serve our enemies? You are a traitor, you are Tatar dung! You have betrayed your homeland!"

Then the Kipchak khans fell on Ibn-Kefrej-Bogra and stabbed him with their daggers. His two Mongol companions were badly beaten.

Bruised and bedraggled, they were delivered to the border of the Khorezm Shah's domain, where their beards were set on fire, and sent on foot, their horses having been confiscated.

Chapter Eleven

JENGHIZ KHAN GETS MAD

The kagan left the tent several times in the course of the day and gazed into the distance — he was waiting for something. Returning to the tent, he would sit down on the silk rug and listen to the words of his head advisor Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai a tall, lean, slow-moving Chinaman with cautious, penetrating eyes:

"It is possible to conquer the universe on horseback, but to rule it from the saddle is impossible. A chief must be assigned for each region without delay; he will tend to the grain reserves and establish tax collecting centers in order to excise the population, with the death penalty for those who do not pay. Two trustworthy men, chosen

from among the learned, should be assigned to each collecting center — one will be the head, the other his assistant. In order to increase profits, merchants must be made to pay duty and taxes must be introduced on wine, vinegar, salt, the extraction of iron, gold and silver and for the right to use water for irrigation...”

“You speak sense,” Jenghiz Khan replied.

The kagan’s seal was presented by its keeper, an Uigur¹ by the name of Izmail Hoja. It was the jade figure of a tiger mounted on a round gold plate smeared with scarlet dye. The kagan pressed the seal to the order that Yeh-lü Ch’u-ts’ai had prepared ahead of time.

In the breezeless swelter of noon, ripples of hot air quivered above the steppe. Jenghiz Khan’s entire camp slumbered; even the horses roaming about the plain now stood motionless, gathered in herds, their heads swaying rhythmically to drive away the gadflies that hovered around them.

From far off, like the buzzing of flies, came a monotonous, shrill sound. Then the swift resonance of bells could be made out. Jenghiz Khan raised a stubby finger, turned his square face to the entrance and perked up his large ear with its saggy lobe on which he wore a heavy gold earring.

“A messenger, and not just one...” And he left the tent.

A cloud of dust could now be seen moving down the road.

Three horsemen were racing toward the camp. They galloped up to the black yurts, where one of the horses tumbled to the ground, sending its rider flying headlong.

The sentries took the horses by the bridles and led them to the outpost. From there they accompanied two of the riders to the corral for colts, where they found Jenghiz Khan.

The kagan was squatting before a white mare, squinting as he watched a grey colt nuzzle the pink udder.

The two men were bound with rags. Their faces were swollen, covered with festering sores. So dramatically had they changed that the kagan turned to them and asked, “Who are you?”

¹*Uigurs* — a Turkic people.

"Great Kagan! We were once the commanders of a thousand nukers but now we are like apparitions from the grave. The Khorezm Shah decided to taunt us a bit by setting fire to our beards — the honor and dignity of a warrior."

"But where is Ibn-Kefrej-Bogra?"

"For having firmly announced your orders to the shah, those dogs who kowtow to the Khorezm pig stabbed him to death."

"What?! They stabbed my emissary! My brave and true Ibn-Kefrej-Bogra?"

Jenghiz Khan let out a wail. He grabbed a handful of sand and poured it over his head. He rubbed his tear-streaked face with his hands. Then, lunging forward, bulky and heavy, he started running down the road. All those who had been with him went running after him, joined by new warriors awakened by the noise, not understanding what the alarm was about.

Huffing and puffing, the kagan reached the tethering post and yanked free an unsaddled stallion. Grabbing hold of its mane he swung up on its back heavily and bolted down the road straight toward the blue mountain. Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai and Jenghiz Khan's sons jumped on their horses and raced after him.

They galloped up to the rocky mountain. There on a ledge amid pine trees stood the kagan. He could be seen from afar. He took off his hat and hung his sash around his neck.¹ Tears, big and glistening, streamed down his dark face, which the kagan smeared with dirt.

"Eternal skies! You save the righteous and punish the guilty," cried the kagan. "You will punish the profane Muslims! Do you hear me, my valiant warriors: the Muslims have strangled my emissary Usun and four hundred fifty diligent merchants who went there to sell their goods. The Muslims have plundered all their property and are laughing at us. They have killed another of my emissaries, the brave Ibn-Kefrej-Bogra. They put fire to the beards of two more of my emissaries as if they were pigs' carcasses and expelled them like beggars, confiscating their horses. Are we going to stand for this?"

¹Among Mongols this sign meant "to give oneself over wholly to the will of the skies".

"Lead us against the Muslims!" roared the Tatars. "We will lay waste to cities, slaughter them all with their wives and children! We will take all their livestock and all their horses."

"There is no frost nor cold storms there," Jenghiz Khan went on billowing. "It is always summer there; sweet melons, cotton and grapes grow there. Grass grows up in the meadows three times a summer. Is it not indecent for such criminals as the Muslims to live in such a happy country? We will take away their lands and wipe their cities from the face of the earth. In place of the destroyed cities we will sow barley, and there our strong horses will graze and only yurts with our faithful wives and children will stand there. Are you prepared to move on the Muslim lands?"

"Just show us where they are and we will slay them!" cried the Tatars.

"I can see even without the shamans that the lucky moon has risen, and it is time to lead our army to the west," Jenghiz Khan said loudly and, turning around, began slowly climbing higher up the mountain. His bodyguards followed him and formed a circle around the place on the mountain where Jenghiz Khan wished to be left alone with his thoughts.

Having climbed higher up the mountain slope, Jenghiz Khan spotted a campfire in a clearing atop a cliff. Near it sat a boy fanning the coals with a small hand bellows; on the coals lay a red-hot strip of iron. Beside him squatted an old Mongol turning the strip over with pincers, his smith's hammer held ready for forging.

"Who are you?" asked the kagan.

"I am the smith Hori, from the tumen of Chepe Noyon."

"Why are you here?"

"I am preparing tempered points for arrowheads. They do not bend when they hit iron, and will penetrate the sturdiest armor. Am I not helping you by making such resistant arrowheads?"

"You talk sense," Jenghiz Khan conceded. "But why do you work here, on the mountain?"

"Here on the mountain there are many resinous roots that give off a hot flame. And to be honest, from here on the mountain I see far across the steppe, and on that side our nomad camps."

"What nonsense is this? Our camps cannot be seen from here. They are far away!"

"But are the steppe's distances not all alike? I look in the direction of home and my heart feels lighter!"

"And is this boy your son?"

"He was a Chinese boy and now he has become my son. I went with you, Great Kagan, to China, where I picked up this abandoned child. I raised him in the saddle. He has become my helper in the smithy."

"And where is your smithy?"

"It is all here with me on the saddle. Here are my hammers, and a scrap of metal will do for an anvil. I keep my bellows in a sack and carry it on the other horse where my son rides."

"And are your horses good and strong?"

"Alas, my horses are very old, so many campaigns did I make on them! When we reach the lands of Bukhara I will pick out some strong horses and a few slave hammerers to boot..."

"If you fight well you will have a whole herd of horses."

"What kind of a warrior am I now? I was wounded gravely. I am no longer much fit for battle. Forging knives and arrowheads — now that is customary work for me. And tell me, Great Khan, will we remain here much longer? Our tumen of Chepe Noyon is going hungry and eating its horses. It is time to be moving on..."

Jenghiz Khan began breathing heavily: this was a bad sign.

"No, first you tell me, smith Hori: what if all of Chepe Noyon's tumen has gone on ahead and been absent now for twelve days? Will you ride across the steppe in search of them, asking vagrants along the way if any of them has seen Chepe Noyon? If all the nukers begin wandering around outside the camp, my whole army will be scattered throughout the steppe!"

The smith trembled and fell face-down to the ground.

"Hear our order: take this smith Hori to my thousand, and in the middle of the kurien give him twenty lashes on the soles of his feet — make them itch. Send a mounted patrol to circle the camp without delay and pick up all nukers who are wandering around outside it, away from their hundreds. I also want the names of their hundred and thousand commanders — I will designate punishment for them all."

Jenghiz Khan kicked aside the smith, who was clinging to his great burly leg, and began climbing slowly up the rocky path. Suddenly he stopped.

"I will be conversing with the skies here about a successful campaign. Post guards around the mountain so that no one interrupts my talk!" Then the kagan strode on up to the top of the mountain.

Chapter Twelve

HOW A LETTER MUST BE WRITTEN

Jenghiz Khan knew no other language besides Mongolian, and he was unable to write.

Historian V. Barthold

Toward evening the kagan returned to his tent and summoned the senior military commanders. Gathered here were both the comrades of Jenghiz Khan's youth, shrouded in the glory of victories, now bent, grey, withered and gaunt; and young warriors, promoted by the insightful kagan, burning with a desire for great feats. Each had under his banner ten thousand horsemen ready to march.

They all sat on rugs in a tight semicircle. Only Jenghiz Khan sat higher than the others on a gold throne. The back of the throne was skillfully crafted by Chinese masters in the form of intertwining "lucky dragons" playing with a "pearl" that resembled a jellyfish with long tentacles; the arms of the throne depicted two ferocious tigers. The kagan had looted this gold-embossed throne in the palace of the Chinese emperor, and he took it with him on all his campaigns.

To the right of the throne sat Jenghiz Khan's two brothers and his two younger sons: Ugedei and Tule, to the left sat the kagan's last wife, the youthful Kulan-Khatun, all aglitter with jeweled necklaces and gold bracelets, adorning her arms from wrist to shoulder. The Chinese servants moved noiselessly behind those seated, setting down golden platters of food and golden goblets of koumiss and heady red wine.

At the kagan's left hand, beside his young wife, sat two ambassadors — Ashaganbu, who had come from the powerful Tangut King Burkhan¹ and the Chinese commander Men Hun², sent by the Sung emperor of South China, who despised the Chin emperor of North China and therefore sought friendship and alliance with the Mongols.

Jenghiz Khan's guests marveled at the splendor of the gold service and the abundance and variety of dishes and drinks. Hot meat was served on large golden platters: that of a young mare, a wild deer and a steppe bustard. This was followed by exquisite sweets prepared by a Chinese chef. Koumiss, *airan*³, red Persian wine and Chinese vodka made from watermelon seeds, rare tropical fruits brought by riders who raced for many days on relayed horses — all this seemed particularly extraordinary in this barren valley entered by herds of wild horses chased by tigers.

From behind the silk curtain of the tent came the shrill voices of Chinese singers, the music of flutes and reed-pipes. Some dancers in queer costumes performed a dance depicting a doe grazing carefree on the steppe and a lynx that steals up and lunges at it but is itself killed by the arrow of a hidden hunter.

Jenghiz Khan, pleased with the success of the feast, sat on the throne with his legs pulled up and, chewing noisily, took chunks of roasted meat from a special platter that was held before him by a kneeling Chinese servant. The best pieces of meat the kagan placed in the mouths of those of his guests whom he wished to grace.

During the feast Jenghiz Khan cast jealous sidelong glances at the Tangut ambassador: he was sitting beside the kagan's wife, Kulan-Khatun, amusing her with a tale of how he, who had never lost his way in the steppe, got lost his first time in China among the narrow winding alleys of the capital. Kulan laughed lightheartedly. Gnawing at a spare rib Jenghiz Khan said to the Tangut ambassador:

¹The Tangut kingdom — a region in north-western China.

²The notes of Men Hun about the Mongols and Jenghiz Khan have been preserved to this day.

³*Airan* — a drink made from fermented cow's, sheep's or goat's milk.

"Your ruler, King Burkhan, promised to be my right-hand man in the forthcoming campaign. Now the Muslims have killed my emissaries, and I am setting out to punish the Shah of Khorezm for this. It is time for King Burkhan to come here with his cavalry and take his place at the right wing of my army."

The Tangut ambassador, occupied by his conversation with the lovely Kulan-Khatun, answered Jenghiz Khan off-handedly, "If you haven't troops enough for your campaign, then you should not be a kagan."

Jenghiz Khan tossed his spare rib aside, wiped his greasy fingers on his white suede boots and drew the hem of his sable mantle across his moustache. Everyone fell quiet. Breathing heavily he snarled, addressing the Tangut ambassador:

"You speak on behalf of your master. How dare you answer me so curtly. Do you think it is difficult for me to march my mighty troops against the Tangut kingdom? But I have other concerns right now, and I shall not go about routing the Tanguts, all of them foul, insidious people like you. However, if the eternal skies spare me from enemy arrows I swear that when I return from having routed the Khorezm Shah I will make war against your disloyal king. Then I shall recall your words and show you whether or not I am capable of being kagan!.. Yeh-lü Ch'u-Ts'ai, order horses brought immediately and see that this Tangut puppy leaves my tent."

The Tangut ambassador Ashaganbu stuttered in reply, "Did I say something offensive?"

But the Chinese servants had already seized him by the arms and hurled him out of the tent.

Scowling, Jenghiz Khan severely reprimanded the Chinese ambassador Men Hun for having drunk so little, and in punishment made him drink six large goblets of wine one after another. The ambassador drank obediently while all the guests sang a song of praise in the Chinaman's honor. After the sixth goblet the ambassador toppled over and fell instantly to sleep. Jenghiz Khan grew merry and amicable once again and said:

"My guest has had his fill of drink! This means he is my friend and shares the thoughts in my heart. Carry my friend gently to his tent. In the morning he too may return home. Tell the city vicegerents to detain him long

and give him wine, tea and whatever food he might desire. Have him accompanied by fine musicians to play the flute and thrum the strings. We do not wish our Chinese friend to want for anything."

When the sleeping ambassador had been carried out, Jenghiz Khan turned to Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai and asked, "Have you written a letter to the murderer of my emissary, to Khorezm Shah Muhammad?"

The kagan's great advisor replied softly, "When two brave commanders prepare to fight am I capable of writing worthily? I know only how to introduce new rules to conquered lands, and I try to make sure your orders are carried out. Therefore the letter has been written by your more experienced scribe Izmail Hoja the Uigur."

"Where is he?"

The aged secretary and keeper of the kagan's seal Izmail Hoja approached the throne and fell to his knees, holding the parchment scroll on his head.

"Read!"

Izmail Hoja began reading:

"The eternal skies appointed me the great kagan of all peoples. In the last seven years I have accomplished extraordinary feats. There has not been such a kingdom since ancient times. I crush rulers for their disobedience, striking terror into their hearts. As soon as my army comes, distant lands also stop resisting and submit to me. Why do you not act respectfully? Consider what you are doing! Surely you too do not want to experience the force of my wrathful blow --"

Jenghiz Khan jumped up from his throne and lunged at Izmail Hoja before he could finish reading, tearing the letter from his hand.

"Who are you writing? A sovereign worthy of speaking to me or the son of a yellow-eared mongrel? Is that any way to address one's enemies? You are a Muslim yourself -- that's why you wag your tail before the Muslim khan. Do you want Shah Muhammad to think that I am afraid of him?"

Izmail Hoja lay with his face buried in the carpet, trembling with fear. The kagan grabbed him by the sash, dragged him out of the tent and threw him down at the entrance with a kick. The advisor Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai ap-

peared beside him and began softly reprimanding him.

"Take a look at the grey beard of your scribe. Remember his services in the course of many years. He taught your children and grandchildren to read and write. You mustn't punish a loyal servant so..."

Jenghiz Khan straightened up.

"Izmail Hoja writes slavish letters. He is not capable of speaking with pride. Let him go on teaching my grandchildren to read and write but he should not undertake to speak with rulers of peoples."

The kagan returned to his tent and climbed back up on his throne. Hugging his right knee, he sat on his left foot for some time. His yellow-green eyes grew wide then narrow again. Another scribe appeared beside the throne with a clean sheet of parchment. Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai gave the scribe a reed pen for writing. But Jenghiz Khan, screwing up his evil eyes, remained silent, staring fixedly at one spot. Then he turned to the scribe waiting on his knees and said:

"Write this, 'You wanted war — you shall have it.'"

As if awakening from a dream, the kagan snatched the gold seal smeared with blue ink¹ from Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai's hand and pressed it to the letter. The following impression was left on the parchment:

*God is in the sky.
The kagan is God's might on earth.
Ruler of the planets' crossing.
The seal of the sovereign of all peoples.*

And suddenly the silence of the muted guests was broken by the battle cry of the charging Mongols:

"Khu-khu-khu!"

Jenghiz Khan's favorite stallions, tethered to a section of the tent, neighed at the sound of their master's voice. Within an instant the Mongol steeds were calling to each other from all corners of the camp.

Gingerly, with both hands, Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai received the parchment, while Jenghiz Khan said, sharp and abrupt, "Dispatch the letter! To the Muslim border!

¹On the kagan's letters to rulers of other peoples the seal was blue; on ordinary documents, red.

Without delay! Send the messenger with a guard! Three hundred horsemen!..” Then, turning back to his guests, the kagan spoke once more in a gentle, purring voice, “And we shall continue our feast, chatting peacefully. Our souls will soon rejoice in Muslim cities. We shall make merry there! I can already see ploughed fields enveloped by mist from our horses’ sweat, frightened people fleeing and lassoed women wailing like animals; the rivers there will flow red, like this wine, and the smoke-filled sky will grow red-hot from the flames of burning settlements...”

He screwed up his eyes and, holding up his stubby finger, he listened to the continuing cries of the stallions throughout the camp.

The guests muttered in undertones, “It seems as though the campaign is soon to begin...” and, as was the custom of high commanders, they clinked their golden goblets, wishing each other success, and discussed the glorious days to follow.

Part Five

THE INVASION OF AN UNKNOWN PEOPLE

Chapter One

HE WHO DOES NOT DEFEND HIMSELF PERISHES

After the invasion of the Mongols the world was plunged into disorder, like the hair of an Ethiopian. People came to resemble wolves.

Saadi, 13th century

Having received Jenghiz Khan’s menacing letter of seven words, Khorezm Shah Muhammad ordered a sturdy wall built up quickly around his new capital of Samarkand, regardless of its size: the length of the wall was to be about eighty-four kilometers.

The shah sent tax collectors to all parts of the state to extort taxes for three years in advance, although even the

taxes for the current year had been collected with difficulty.

The shah also ordered detachments of archers to be formed. The archers were to report to assigned gathering posts on horseback, armed and with several days' supply of food.

Finally, the shah ordered the immediate incineration of all settlements on the right bank of the river Saihun to the eastern border with the Kara-Kitais, whose country had been penetrated by Mongols. The shah ordered the inhabitants of the burned settlements driven out of the devastated territory so that the Mongols would find neither shelter nor food for themselves when they marched through the burned area. But the incensed population of the devastated lands fled to the Kara-Kitais, where the men joined the Mongol troops.

While troops were arriving from all corners of Khorezm, the shah was stationed in Samarkand. Accompanied by his servile retinue, he visited mosques, where he listened to the eloquent sermons of the Sheik-ul-Islam. He prayed zealously before numerous believers, who stood in orderly rows in the square before the mosque. He knelt down along with them and loudly repeated the prayers after the imam.

At the start of the Year of the Dragon (1220) Muhammad summoned an emergency council of chief commanders, distinguished beks, high officials and grey-bearded imams.

Everyone expected wise and bold decisions inspiring hopes and enthusiasm from the "new Iskender", "Muhammad the Warrior", as he had come to be known since the routing of insurgent Samarkand and the campaign into the Kipchak steppes. Seated on rugs in a tight circle in expectation of the shah, everyone spoke of his military experience, about how he would, of course, be able to deliver the country from danger quickly and successfully.

Timur-Melik told them, "Today the padishah made the rounds to all the fortifications and surveyed the work. He watched for a long time as thousands of subjects and slaves driven here from all over dug moats. The ground was frozen and did not succumb to the shovel. The shah grew angry and cried, 'If you keep working this slowly

the wild Tatars will merely rush up and throw their lances into the moats and the moats will be filled to the top.' The workers heard this, and their hearts filled with horror. 'Does Jenghiz Khan really have so many warriors?' they said."

The Khorezm Shah entered the conference hall, silent and impenetrable. He settled into his throne, pulling his legs up under him. The head imam read a short prayer, concluding with the words, "May Allah keep the blessed, flourishing lands of Khorezm for the good and glory of the padishah!" Everyone held up their palms and drew their fingertips down their beards. The shah said:

"I expect help from each of you. Let everyone in turn indicate the measures he considers best."

The first to speak was the grand imam, old Shikhab ed-Din-Khivaki, erudite in many sciences, dubbed the "pillar of faith and the stronghold of the kingdom".

"I shall repeat here that which I always spoke from the heights of the *mimbar*¹ in the mosque. The trustworthy *Hadith*² of the Prophet — blessed and glorified be his name! — says: 'He who is killed defending his life and property is a martyr, a *jahid*³.' All must now leave the murk of worldly affairs to follow the path of obedience and crush the myriads of cares with the sword of valor and zeal."

"We are all prepared to lay down our lives on the field of battle!" exclaimed all those seated.

"But just what do you advise?" asked the shah.

"You are a great commander, you are the new Iskender!" said the old imam. "You must move all your countless troops to the banks of the Saihun and meet the pagan Mongols there in decisive battle. You must attack the enemy with fresh forces before they have a chance to rest after the hard journey across the deserts of Asia."

Muhammad lowered his eyes and said nothing in reply. Then he ordered the next man to speak.

One Kipchak khan said, "We must let the Mongols into the interior of our kingdom. Here we will destroy them easily."

¹*Mimbar* — an altar, pulpit.

²*Hadith* — the collection of legends about the life and words of the Prophet Muhammad not contained in the Koran.

³*Jahid* — a person pleasing to Allah.

Other Kipchak khans advised the shah to leave Samarkand and Bukhara to their fates, relying on the sturdiness of their high walls, and merely organize the defense of the crossing of the great river Jaihun, so as not to let the Mongols push farther into Persia.

"I know these crude nomads well," said one khan. "They will pass through the country, ravage it, but they will not stay here long. They do not like the heat. Both they and their horses are accustomed to a cold winter. While the Mongols are masters here we will try to protect our beloved padishah — may his reign last another hundred twenty years! We will retreat beyond the ranges of the Hindu Kush and farther to Ghazni. There we will gather a new, larger army. If necessary we can withdraw into India. And in the meantime the Mongols will get their fill of the spoils and return back to their steppes."

"The words of a coward!" grumbled Timur-Melik. Muhammad asked his son Jelal ed-Din:

"And what do you suggest?"

"I am your warrior and I await your orders."

"And you, Timur-Melik?"

"He who attacks is the victor. And he who relies only on defense condemns himself to the winds of decay," Timur-Melik replied. "That is why a weak man who attacks bravely defeats the strong, ferocious tiger. He who retreats with his tail between his legs, who is afraid to meet the enemy face to face, always hides beyond the mountains. Why do you ask me? I have long been begging you to let me go to where the front-running Tatar patrols are already roaming. In battles with them I will make sure my arrow still soars true, my bright sabre not grown heavy!"

"Let it be so!" said Muhammad. "The passes will soon be free of snow, and the Mongols will start coming down from the mountains into the Fergana Valley. There you will test your sabre on Mongol heads. I name you commander of the troops of the city of Khojent."

Everyone looked down, pressing together the tips of their fingers. It was clear that the shah was angry with the candid Timur-Melik, as unrestrained in speech as he was irrepressible in battle. He never added the honey of flattery to the Khorezm Shah's flow of eloquence. Khojent had a small detachment, and for an experienced leader

like Timur-Melik it was no honor to be made commander of such an insignificant fortress. But Timur-Melik's words concealed thorns of insult, and Muhammad added:

"Timur-Melik claims that only he who attacks is the victor? At war it is not reckless courage that is needed, but discretion. I shall not ignore or leave any town defenseless. I also think that the Mongols or the Tatars, bundled in sheepskins, will be unable to withstand our heat and will not remain here long. The best defense for the peaceful inhabitants are the indestructible walls of our fortresses and —"

"And your mighty hand! Your wisdom!" chimed in the smooth-tongued khans.

"Of course, the army I lead will be a menacing, steadfast rock in the Tatars' path," said Muhammad. "Has not the brave Inalchik Kair Khan held out for five months already in besieged Otrar, thus detaining the onslaught of the Mongols? He beats back their every attack, because I dispatched reinforcements of twenty thousand brave Kipchaks in good time..."

"Hurray for Kair Khan!" cried the khans.

"I was told by trustworthy, knowledgeable men that compared to my army the Tatar army is but a trickle of smoke in the darkness of the night. Why fear it? I will leave one hundred ten thousand warriors in Samarkand, not counting the volunteers and twenty mighty war elephants that will strike terror into the Tatars. There are fifty thousand brave fighters in Bukhara. Likewise, I have sent twenty or thirty thousand defenders to each of the other cities. What will remain of Jenghiz Khan's Tatars if they are detained for a whole year at each fortress? New troops will not come to reinforce him, and his strength will melt like snow in summer..."

"May Allah grant it!" everyone exclaimed.

"And in the meantime," the shah went on, "I will gather new troops of Muslims in Persia. With fresh forces I shall rout what remains of the Tatars so thoroughly that their grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be afraid to ever come near the lands of Islam."

"May Allah grant it!" cried the khans. "These are truly wise words spoken by an invincible commander!"

At that moment the head of the chancery came up to the shah and handed him a note. It bore a short message

delivered by a poor dervish who had barely managed to slip by the Mongol outposts. The message stated that the twenty thousand Kipchaks dispatched by the shah to Otrar had mutinied and gone over to the side of the Mongols. Everyone looked with alarm at Muhammad, trying to determine by his face whether the tidings were good or bad. The shah furrowed his brows and whispered, "It is time; we must not tarry!" Then he rose and, after hearing the imam's prayer, disappeared into the inside chambers of the palace.

Chapter Two

KURBAN-KYZYK IS MADE A JIGIT

"Hey, Kurban-Kyzyk¹, hey, joker! From now on you won't be working with a spade anymore. The Khorezm Shah has named you the commander-in-chief of his brave troops." Without dismounting, the jigit rapped on the low crooked door of Kurban's hut with the handle of his whip.

"What is this new misfortune come down upon us?" cried a thin, bent old woman, Kurban's mother, hobbling hastily up from the vegetable garden.

"Come out of there now, Kurban! What are you sleeping by day for? Probably had too much *buza*² to drink."

"Who can be thinking about buza!" the old woman lamented. "First Kurban stayed by the canal all night until the water came, then he watered his plot, and after that he fought with four neighbors — they wanted to take his water to their fields before he was through with the watering. Now Kurban is covered with bruises and lies moaning."

The old woman vanished into the hut, out of which appeared Kurban. He stood disheveled, rubbing his eyes and glancing fearfully at the dashing horseman on a dapple-grey steed.

"*Salam*, bek jigit! What can I do for the head of the district?"

¹*Kyzyk* — a clown, joker.

²*Buza* — an intoxicating drink made from millet or rice.

"You are to report to the Khorezm Shah himself with a steed and a sword and a spear to fight with unknown Yajui and Majui..."

Round-shouldered and long-necked, Kurban scratched his back with his open hand.

"Don't poke fun at me, bek jigit! What kind of a warrior am I? I cannot hold anything in my hand but a *ketmen*¹ and a soup spoon."

"To speculate is neither your business nor mine. The khakim has sent me around to all the village elders to convey his order — for all citizens to gather immediately: he who has a horse, on horseback; he who has a camel, on camelback. Don't forget — tomorrow you're to report to your bek, and he will lead you warriors, all as dashing as yourself, to war. Anyone who does not show up will lose his head. Understood?"

"Wait, bek jigit, explain what this is all about. What Yajui-Majui?"

But the jigit whipped his dapple-grey stallion and galloped away. Only a cloud of dust rose above the road and drifted slowly to one side, settling on a field.

"Kurban, my son, what are the beks up to, what do they want from you?" badgered the old woman, sitting down on the ground in the doorway.

"They've gone mad, that's what. Oh, why hasn't our old jade died yet! Then they wouldn't have summoned me to the khakim." Kurban started toward a sorrel mare that was nibbling grass between ploughed fields. The end of its halter was held by Kurban's little son, half-naked, in wide pants rolled up past his knees.

"Hey, Kurban-Kyzyk, what happened?" cried the neighboring villagers, running up from the nearby plots where they had been working.

Kurban did not answer. His entire body still ached after the beating they had given him. He patted the mare, straightened its scanty mane and stroked its lean, bony back.

"Do not be cross with us, Kurban! You know how it is: first dogs will fight over a bone, and then the next thing you know they're lying in the sun together again,"

¹*Ketmen* — a type of large hoe used in the East in place of a shovel for digging up the earth.

said the neighbors. "Even a brother may well become a beast fighting over water. So tell us, Kurban, what did that jigot of the district chief come here for?"

"War..." said Kurban hollowly.

"War?!" echoed all four and froze.

"What war can there be," said one, coming around at last. "The Khorezm Shah is the strongest sovereign in the world; his shadow covers the universe. Who will dare wage war against him?"

"What do they want from us anyway? We are not warriors. We sow grain, then the beks take it away from us, and let that be the end of it."

"Just what did the jigot say?"

"Everyone will go to war," he replied, "to defend our land. Whoever has a horse or a camel must take it and report to the bek."

"I'll take my wife and my children and flee to the mountains or the swamps. What have I got to defend? These lands? Why, they are not ours, but the bek's anyway! Let the beks take their jigits and fight for them!"

"The Khorezm Shah has his own army made up of mercenary Kipchaks. It is their business to fight. So far they have fought mainly with us tillers, and they have caused us no end of trouble."

"But now as soon as they're in need they turn to us."

"Hey, look! Yet another misfortune!"

Some horsemen were moving quickly down the road, picking up dust, with four carts on large wheels rumbling along behind them. They came to a halt by Kurban's hut. Several attendants with long white sticks jumped down from the carts.

"Come here!" said one of the horsemen. Kurban and the other villagers drew near, heads bowed and hands folded on their stomachs.

"You ought to know me. I am the district *hasib*, the tax collector. The chief paymaster Mustafi sent out an order to all the *hasibs*. The country is threatened by war; pagan Tatars are moving upon us from the steppe. If they break into our lands they will massacre everyone, confiscate the livestock and grain, and we will be left naked."

"We are naked as is," said Kurban's old mother.

"And if the enemy comes," the *hasib* went on, "our

heads will roll as well. Much money and grain are needed in order to arm and feed five hundred thousand soldiers. For this reason the shah has ordered us to collect taxes."

"But we just paid the taxes."

"You paid for this year, now pay for the next. You must pay now. We'll start with the first man. Whose house is this?"

"Mine, honorable leader," said Kurban-Kyzyk. "I have nothing to pay with! I have nothing at all! Only a hen, and even she lays no eggs."

"I knew you were going to say that! You all speak alike. Hey boys, have a good look around the house, especially the shed!"

Four jigits crossed the yard, looked around the shed and the vegetable garden and came back empty-handed. True, one held the hen.

"I'll give you two days. Today you'll get fifty lashes and you'll be beaten every day until you bring me a sack of grain. And then your plot of land will be given to another, more zealous tiller who will not refuse to help the brave army."

Kurban-Kyzyk fell to the ground.

"I will do everything the shah wants!.. I will ride my mare into battle with the Yajuji and Majuji. I will work, repair bridges and roads, but do not beat me in front of my children and do not demand grain when there is none! I have four little children, as small as cockroaches, and an aged mother. I must feed them, but I do not know what with. Have mercy on me, honorable hasib!" He embraced the hooves of the tax-collector's horse, surprising himself at the boldness of his words, and he felt as worthless as a bug, while his sorrel mare seemed as miserable as a hungry dog.

"You, I see, are a joker, Kurban-Kyzyk," said the tax-collector. "I'm sure you know that the great Allah created a hierarchy for people for all time: highest of all he placed the shah, followed by beks, then merchants, and simple tillers at the bottom. Each must do what is fitting for him — the shah gives the orders and everyone else must obey. And what must a farmhand do? Work for the bek and for the shah. So have a sack of grain ready. All right, today I will not beat you, I've no time anyway. But tomorrow I'll have your hide."

The hasib whipped his horse and continued on his way.

When the dust from the departed tax-collectors had settled and the downcast neighbors had gone their separate ways, Kurban-Kyzyk began preparing for his own departure.

He went to the mullah at the mosque, and to the merchant who had a stall at the bend in the big road. He listened to the talk of passers-by and concluded that the bek was right: everywhere people spoke of war and of an unknown people. It was coming from the east: probably ordinary Kirghiz nomads, Kara-Kitais or Uigurs, or some other Tatar tribe, built up after a few years of good harvests when the livestock multiplied and there were neither blizzards nor cattle-plagues.

Rumors spread rampantly that the warriors of this tribe were the size of a man and a half, they were invulnerable to swords and arrows and to resist them was pointless. The only salvation from them was to hide behind the high sturdy walls of the cities or flee to the swamps.

Kurban returned home pensive. He cut up some straw and *jugara*¹ stalks for the mare. He took down a rusty piece of a scythe and fixed it to a pole — this would serve as a spear. Then he went to the smith's and helped him in his work, because many of the villagers setting out for Bukhara at the shah's order gathered in the smithy. Kurban earned nine copper dirhams by helping the smith, so he was able to buy a few small scraps of lamb.

In the evening Kurban's wife came home after working all day in the landowner's field. She made a kettle of gruel from *jugara* and baked some flat bread with pieces of lamb's fat.

When the whole family, having settled down around the clay bowl, silently began eating, Kurban, maintaining the dignified air of the head of the house, furtively surveyed each member of the family.

There was his bent mother with her dishevelled grey hair; work had put a hump on her back. He recalled her as she was in her youth — beautiful, olive-skinned, with

¹*Jugara* — a tall plant with a stalk like that of corn and a cluster of large kernels from which a gruel was made and served as the staple food of the poor.

shining black eyes and a merry laugh. Work beneath the scorching sun on flooded fields, lugging heavy bushels of jugara or brushwood, perpetual labor had bent her back and rounded her shoulders.

There was his wife, already fading, deep wrinkles cutting across her gentle, pretty face. All day long she would sit bent over on the floor, doing her best to weave as much fabric as she could. Her hands had become calloused, her fingers knotted like an old woman's.

Four children sitting side by side greedily stuffed their mouths with gruel, while their mother gave each a tiny piece of lamb. The oldest, Hassan, was already eleven. He asked to go to Bukhara with his father, not only to see that magnificent city, but to catch a glimpse of his father charging ahead on his prancing steed, with his long, pliant spear, his sword and shiny round shield.

There were the other three children: the oldest girl, an adolescent, already covered her face shyly with the corner of her shawl. Then two more youngsters. They sat side by side on their heels, shoveling gruel into their mouths and smearing it all over their cheeks. What would become of them?

Kurban was awake most of the night discussing with his wife how to manage the household in his absence, when to irrigate the field, how to call on the neighbors for help at harvest time, and what to feed them once they had come.

"What if the Yajuji come here?" his wife asked. "Where should we run? And how can we meet up with you afterwards?"

Kurban reassured his wife. How could this unknown enemy possibly appear in Bukhara, the very heart of Islam? The Shah of Khorezm would probably gather together his mighty army and lead it across the Kipchak lands in order to meet and destroy the enemy in the steppe, and then Kurban would return on a fine steed leading a second horse laden with war spoils — gifts for all the family.

Early in the morning Kurban went to the nearest ravine and brought back so much brushwood on his mare that beneath the pile of twigs only four legs could be seen. Kurban chopped up the brushwood and stacked it neatly by the wall. Once again he reminded his wife and

mother not to tell anyone about the pit, smeared inside with clay and laid with straw, in which a small reserve of jugara and sowing wheat seeds were hidden. That should last them for a long time, and then Kurban would return.

"How will you set out on this long journey?" his wife and mother lamented. "You have neither bread nor money! You will die in a gutter along with your horse. Take our jugara!"

"Do not fear!" replied Kurban. "The road will feed the jigit."

Chapter Three

THE WAR BEGINS

Home-made spear in hand, Kurban-Kyzyk set out on his way. He stopped by the bek's estate to find out where he was supposed to report. The steward scolded him and said that the bek Inanch Khan had already left with a detachment of horsemen. All late arrivals were to catch up with them on the main road to Bukhara.

Groups of villagers on foot and horseback, and files of two-wheeled carts loaded down with possessions and children could be seen along all the trails. The women and old people trudged along wailing and sobbing. Lines of carts stretched in all directions — some toward the city, others, on the contrary, toward the southern mountains.

It was the beginning of spring. The winter crops stood green on the fields. The sun already warmed the air. The roads had dried, and dust billowed up in thick clouds over the crowds of departing people. Near the settlements smithies could be found, filled with the sounds of hammers at work and armed men shouting and arguing, wishing to have a horse shod or to obtain a spear-head or a skillfully forged sword.

By evening of the next day, when the clay walls of Bukhara's suburbs had appeared in the distance, Kurban had already befriended a black-eyed, bearded dervish who was walking alongside a black donkey loaded down with packs. A boy of about thirteen was by his side at all times. The dervish sang songs and wished luck and success

upon the valiant men marching against the infidels. Some of the soldiers put flat bread or handfuls of grain into the dervish's bowl.

When night fell, thousands of fires lit up around the city. Kurban, following the dervish, found himself beside some low structures which reverberated with monotonous cries of "gu, gu-u, gu-u!" This was the *hanaka* — the place where the dervishes stopped along the way. Inside were many people requesting of the dervishes cures for illnesses and prayers that would protect them from death in the impending war. The dervishes chanted, read charms and gave their visitors slips of paper with holy inscriptions.

Tying his mare up near the wall, Kurban walked among the campfires, gathering up scattered straw for his horse and the black donkey. The dervish shared with him his bread and the mash he had boiled from meal in his tin.

"The road will feed the jigit," Kurban recalled.

Fighting off sleep, Kurban spent the whole night near his horse, its reins wound around his hand. He had heard it said around the fires that people were now paying good money for the lamest of horses, as everyone wanted to go as far as possible from Bukhara, into the mountains of Persia, or to India, where the unknown pagans would not follow.

As morning approached Kurban fell so fast asleep that he did not hear how someone cut the reins and led his old mare away.

"They say that Allah punishes the shameless thief who steals the horse of a soldier setting out to fight a holy war," said the dervish. "But in the meantime He has punished me, poor Haji Rakhim, too, for the thief took my old donkey as well. Our only consolation is that now we shall tour noble Bukhara unburdened by luggage."

Kurban rested his long spear on his shoulder and set out with the dervish and his young companion to survey the renowned city — the "bright star of enlightenment."

The three travelers trudged along toward Bukhara in the midst of a countless crowd, moving in an endless stream.

The high walls, built in ancient times, overgrown with weeds and brambles and crumbled in places, had eleven gates by which the merchants' caravans tied this stronghold of Islam to all the corners of the universe.

A large group had gathered by the first gates. The sentries were questioning everyone who passed and beseeching them all, "Sacrifice something for the fortification of the city, to feed the soldiers, to manufacture swords! May stinginess not close your fists, may generosity unloose your money-pouches!"

The scholarly old ulems wandered through the crowd with leather purses demanding that everyone donate to the holy cause of defending the homeland.

Trade rows began just the other side of the gates. Small shops with all kinds of goods were bunched together side by side. The merchants, knowing what wares were in particular demand that day, advertized the merits of cheap fabrics, sturdy for traveling, or well pressed felt mats, essential for sleeping on the road, or honey bagels that would not go stale with time.

Groups of befuddled refugees could be seen everywhere; they had arrived from outlying areas with their children and their belongings in search of shelter and protection.

Having passed through the giant gates of the second wall, separating the suburbs from the inner city of Shahristan, the three travelers turned off the noisy street into a quiet square surrounded by the high arcs of mosques and madrasah. Here several thousand young and old emaciated students — *shagirds* — sought to comprehend the wisdom of the divine Arab books, so that after many years of labor and deprivations they might become imams in some miserable mosques somewhere.

Here in the square a solemn service was being held: worshippers in rows as even as the lines of the holy book stood perfectly still, following the movements of the grand, grey-bearded imam. When he dropped to his knees, bowed down to the earth or raised his hands, several thousand faithful Muslims imitated his motions. Only the rustling of countless falling and rising bodies carried, like a gust of wind, across the stone slabs of the square.

When the prayers ended a bay horse with a red tail, covered with a scarlet saddle cloth embroidered in gold flowers, was led to the steps of the high mosque.

The tall, black-bearded Khorezm Shah stepped out of the mosque in his snow-white turban glittering with diamond threads.

The shah addressed the crowd with the words, "All

Peoples of Islam are one people. Our best defense is a well sharpened sword. The Prophet said of the faithful, 'I created you, warriors of Islam, best of the world's creations, and I named the Muslims rulers of all that is on earth and in the skies'. The faithful must be rulers of the universe, so fear nothing! But the holy book likewise tells us, 'Allah graces the slave only according to his own efforts...' Therefore you must apply all your diligence in order to strike the enemy with the sword of daring... For can anything stand up against the ferocity of faithful Muslims, giving up their souls for the word of the Prophet?! Kill the enemy everywhere you find him, and drive him away! Allah, great in Thy wrath, give us victory over the infidels!"

"Kill the infidels! Drive off the pagans!" roared the crowd.

The Khorezm Shah mounted his bay horse with its red tail and added, "Our aim is to give good advice, and we have given it to you. We are departing for Samarkand to meet the impious, who are already descending from the snow-covered passes of the Tien Shan... But woe unto them! Encountering the fearless columns of our dashing warriors, they will quickly meet their ruin... We put you in the hands of Allah!"

"Long live Muhammad the Warrior! Long live the Khorezm Shah, victor over the infidels!" cried the crowd, making way for the shah and his Kipchak bodyguards in all their finery to pass. "You alone are our best defense!"

Chapter Four

A WARRIOR'S DEFENSE IS THE BLADE OF HIS SWORD

Having left Bukhara, the Khorezm Shah Muhammad suddenly turned his steed and headed not down the main road toward Samarkand, but to the south, in the direction of Kelif. Shrouding his head in a silk shawl, he rode in silence, alternating between a trot and a gallop, and his whole retinue followed close behind him. Oncoming travelers scurried from the road, into the gutter. They fell prostrate to the ground and stared in wonder at the one thousand horsemen who raced as if pursued by the terrible Iblis.

In vain did the grand vizier point out to the padishah's son Jelal ed-Din that their master had probably taken the wrong road. Jelal ed-Din replied impassively, "What difference does it make to me! I shall follow my father even should he choose to leap into the fiery abyss of hell."

"What estate is this?" asked the Khorezm Shah suddenly, bringing his foamy bay to a halt. He pointed with his whip to some walls with sloping towers, beyond which rose up a row of tall slender poplars.

"That is the hunting estate of Timur-Melik Khan. It is renowned for its old garden and its rare menagerie of wild animals."

"I want to see all this!" said Muhammad. "But why do I not see brave Timur-Melik here?"

"The very same day he received the order to head the garrison at Khojent he left for there."

"Obstinate fool! I did not order him to make haste. Now it is dull without him around..."

The guard of one hundred horsemen raced ahead to prepare the reception. Muhammad, holding back his zealous horse, trotted off toward the estate. The heavy gates swung open. Servants were dashing around the courtyard. Clanking their keys they opened the doors leading out onto the long terrace. Slaves hauled sacks of barley and bales of dry hay. The jigits raced off to the nearest village and returned with choice rams across their saddles. The field cooks made fires and set about preparing supper.

The shah climbed a ladder to an open arbor by the garden wall. He was followed by Jelal ed-Din and the old servant at the estate.

From the arbor they could see the garden, still bare and leafless. A few wild she-goats lay in a glade, basking in the sun, and nearby a long-horned mountain goat stood alert.

"Farther back there in the depths of the garden are two boar families with little piglets," the servant explained. "And two very fierce leopards, recently brought from the mountains are kept in a cage. My valorous master Timur-Melik likes to watch the leopards chase the boars and goats from this arbor, and sometimes he goes down to the garden to hunt himself. He can kill a beast with one arrow, predicting in advance where it will land."

"Be gone!" said the shah severely.

Left alone with his son, he began in a half-whisper, "I am alarmed. Messengers have arrived from three directions at once. Black clouds are moving in from every direction."

"Such is war!" Jelal ed-Din observed with utter indifference.

"The first messenger reported that the red tiger Jenghiz Khan took over Otrar, seized Inalchik Kair Khan and, in order to have his fill of vengeance, had melted silver poured into his eyes and ears. Now Jenghiz Khan has moved this way in search of me."

"Let him come! We are expecting him."

"You remain unconcerned even in the face of terrible disaster!"

"We have such an army that there is no reason to despair."

"The second messenger arrived from the south. He claims to have seen Tatar mounted patrols."

"Some small detachment, no doubt. Now, in early spring, a large army would surely have perished in the snow-covered passes."

"But now that it has descended from the mountains, the Tatar detachment will cut off our route of retreat in the direction of India."

"Why should we retreat there?"

"There is yet another report. Mongol mounted patrols have already been sighted in the Kyzyl-Kum Desert."

"A detachment of ten thousand Turkmens on horseback was dispatched to the desert as a covering force."

"These Turkmens will not hold up against the Mongols."

"If this is so, then Jenghiz Khan might appear before the gates of Bukhara any day now. We shall prepare for this."

"Maybe the red-bearded beast is already stealing toward Bukhara, his detachments are roaming all about, searching for us. We must leave here without delay!.."
Muhammad mumbled and glanced around as if anticipating an attack from behind the bushes of the garden. Jelal ed-Din said nothing.

"Why do you not answer me?"

"You seem to think I am out of my mind. What more can I say?"

"I command you to speak."

"Then I will tell you something, and you can either pardon me or have my head. If that cursed Jenghiz Khan is coming here, then our troops must not hide behind the high walls of the cities, but seek him out. I would drive out to the field all the Kipchak khans, bold when it comes to skinning submissive villagers, but timid as leaves at this harsh hour of war. I would forbid them under the threat of death to cower behind the walls of the cities. A warrior's defense is the blade of his sword and a brisk steed. The red-headed tiger is coming this way? All the better. Then we already know his path. We must turn our horses around and follow his trail, bite his heels, become a barrier on his way, attack from all directions, kill his camels and skin his red hide. What good are the one hundred thousand horsemen hidden behind the walls of Samarkand? They only eat lamb, while their noble steeds lose strength —"

"You contend the orders of your father? I noticed this long ago. You await my death."

Jelal ed-Din lowered his eyes, and his voice was filled with sorrow.

"That is not so. I will not abandon you in these times of trouble, when the universe trembles. But I swear by the memory of your beloved Iskender that I must be out of my mind to act so meekly and indecisively. What good is your enormous army if it does not stand in battle formation, if it is not prepared to charge the enemy at a sign of your hand! What good are the high walls if they protect not our wives and children, but armed warriors, cowering beneath the shawls of trembling women! Execute me if you like, but do as I say. Father, let us go to Samarkand and muster the army for the march."

"Only to Persia or India!.."

"No! We are left with but two options: the courage of battle or the disgrace of death in exile. We will lead the army out onto the open field and engage the Tatars in battle... We will be as swift as a flash of lightning, as illusive as shadows in the night... You will be glorified as a great commander!.. Do not tarry, act!"

"You are no commander," said the shah majestically, raising his finger with its diamond ring, "you are a brave jigit. You can even be the leader of several thousand jigits

who fly upon the enemy like crazy men... I, though, cannot act as a brave but reckless jigit. I must think everything through, foresee everything. I have decided otherwise. You and I will set out for Kelif, where I shall guard the crossing of the river Jaihun."

"You will abandon our home country? Then the people will be justified in wreaking curses upon the entire clan of Khorezm shahs for having been capable only of exacting taxes from them and on the day of danger abandoning them to be devoured by the Tatars!"

"In Persia I shall gather an enormous new army."

"No, padishah! You must act now with the forces you have in your hands. It is too late to train another army, when your own is left without a leader, hidden behind walls. An army is trained for twenty years in order to gain the victory in one day. Let us go to Samarkand! I shall fight beside you as a simple jigit!.."

"No, no! I command you to set out for Balkh and assemble a new army there. Luck has quit me."

"Luck?" cried Jelal ed-Din, enraged. "What is luck? Can luck quit the brave? One must not flee from luck! One must race after it, catch it, grab it by the hair and pin it under one's knee... That is how luck is attained!.."

"Enough! You will always be a wild jigit! You cannot save the great Khorezm from destruction..."

The Khorezm Shah descended hastily from the arbor and, breathing heavily, set out toward the terrace of the house, where rugs and a lavish dastarkhan had been laid out. Having performed the prayer, the shah started eating, inquiring about roads, crossings and, without finishing his supper, ordered the horses delivered.

Chapter Five

THE INDOMITABLE TIMUR-MELIK

Jenghiz Khan left his sons Ugedei and Jatagai near Otrar with part of the army and told them, "You shall besiege the city of Otrar until you capture its leader Inalchik Kair Khan alive. Send him to me in chains. I myself will assign an unheard-of execution for that insolent scoundrel."

He ordered his eldest son Juchi to take the cities of Jend and Yengikent and dispatched the remaining divisions of his army in various directions.

The kagan sent Alak Noyon along with five thousand horsemen to the city of Benaket, held by a Kipchak detachment. After a three-days' siege the inhabitants sent out their elders and pleaded for mercy. Alak Noyon ordered all men to leave the city boundaries and assemble in the field — warriors on one side, craftsmen and other people on the other. Once the men had laid down their arms in the assigned place and moved away, the Mongols slaughtered them all with maces, swords and arrows. Of the remaining prisoners the Mongols picked out the strongest youths, divided them into thousands, hundreds and tens, put them under their own leaders and drove them on like cattle to break down the walls of the besieged cities and be the front runners in assaults.

Along the way Alak Noyon was joined by other Mongol and allied detachments, so that he eventually accumulated nearly eighty thousand warriors. They approached the city of Khojent, washed by the swift waters of the river Saihun. The inhabitants of the city placed all their hopes on the invulnerability of the ancient walls and refused to surrender.

Timur-Melik, skilled in military affairs and known for his courage, obstinacy and forthrightness, had just been named commander of the city's troops. He had managed to erect a high fortress on an island in the middle of the Saihun in the place where the river split into two branches, and stored reserves of ammunition and food there.

When the Mongols arrived and herded forth their captives, the Muslim prisoners, driven on by swords and whips, began storming the walls of Khojent. Its inhabitants, unwilling to fight with their own people, decided to stop the defense.

Timur-Melik took one thousand valiant jigits, crossed the river, seizing all the vessels, and fortified his position on the island.

The inhabitants of Khojent sent some distinguished persons to the Mongols with a plea for mercy and opened the gates. The Mongols immediately plundered the city.

They shot at the island fortress from catapults, but the rocks and arrows did not reach the stronghold. Then they

drove all the young men out of Khojent and put them together with the prisoners from Benaket and other towns, so that now some fifty thousand men were gathered on both sides of the river. Dividing them into tens and hundreds, the Mongols drove them twenty kilometers to the nearest mountain, from which they were made to haul boulders in order to dam up the river.

In the meantime, Timur-Melik constructed twelve rafts, fire-proofed with roofing made of wet felt mats and clay. Slits for arrows were made in the sides. Every day at dawn he sent six rafts in either direction, and his warriors fought desperately with the Mongols, while the Mongols' fire arrows brought no harm to the rafts.

By night Timur-Melik would organize surprise attacks on the sleeping Mongols, so that their army was in a constant state of alarm.

The Chinese engineers who accompanied the Mongols built new, more powerful long-range catapults. These catapults that launched boulders and large arrows began to take their toll on Timur-Melik's warriors. Seeing that his position was becoming hopeless, one dark night Timur-Melik, having prepared seventy boats and rafts, piled them with provisions and loaded on his men. Fires and torches flared up suddenly on all the vessels, and in a fiery stream they sailed down the river, carried away by its swift current.

The Mongol army chased them along both banks. Timur-Melik steered the boats and rafts to wherever the Mongols appeared. With bow and arrow he fought them off and steered the vessels on farther downstream. Having reached Benaket and broken with one fell swoop the strong chain which the Mongols had stretched across the river, the boats and rafts sailed on by.

Fearing that there might be more serious blockades on the river up ahead, Timur-Melik, having noticed large herds of horses near Bar-Haligkent, pulled in to shore, put his men on horses and raced off into the steppe; the Mongols pursued him. Timur-Melik's warriors would have to stop, engage in battle, fight back the Mongols, then gallop on ahead.

No one chose to surrender, and only a few survived, slipping between Mongol camps by night. Timur-Melik was left with a handful of men, but he continued to fight

back, retreating farther and farther into the steppe, hoping his horse's strength would hold out.

When Timur-Melik's remaining companions had been felled and he had but three arrows left in his quiver, only three Mongols were pursuing him. He pierced one Mongol's eye with an arrow and charged at the others. They turned their horses around and galloped away.

With two arrows in his quiver Timur-Melik reached a water hole in the desert where he found some Turkmens from Kara-Konchar's detachment. They gave him a fresh horse, and Timur-Melik raced on to Khorezm, where he undertook further measures in the ongoing war with Jenghiz Khan.

Chapter Six

THE MONGOLS CROSS THE DESERT

That cursed people rides so swiftly that no one would believe it lest he saw it himself.

Klavigo, 15th century

While the ruins of burned buildings smouldered in Otrar, and steadfast Inalchik Khan, having shut himself up in the citadel, continued stubbornly repelling the Mongols who were climbing up the walls, Jenghiz Khan, unfurling his white, nine-pointed banner, ordered his detachments to be ready to march.

Jenghiz Khan summoned his sons and the top commanders. Everyone sat in a circle on a large felt mat. Each had already received his order as to which direction to take and what city to move on, but no one had dared ask the ruthless ruler where he would have his white banner fly.

"In my absence," said Jenghiz Khan, "the cautious Bugurji Noyon will have authority over the whole army. The vanguard will be led by Chepe Noyon, swift in attacks, and Sabutai, experienced in ambushes. Do not dare trample the grain in the fields, otherwise there will be nothing with which to feed the horses. We will meet Shah Muhammad on the plain between Bukhara and Samarkand.

We will attack him from three sides. Once I have destroyed the Khorezm Shah's principal troop I will become the ruler of all the Muslim countries."

Having drunk his koumiss and then performed libation to the spirit — the patron of warriors Sulde — Jenghiz Khan mounted his steed, and the army marched. Some detachments set out along the Saihun upstream, others downstream, while Jenghiz Khan moved into the depths of the Kyzyl-Kum Desert along the caravan routes.

By day the February sun shone blindingly and gave off warmth; by night puddles froze, and the narrow winding path through the muddy *takyrs*¹ hardened. The army moved noiselessly; neither the neighing of horses nor the clank of weapons could be heard, and no one dared take up a song. The detachments kept close to one another. Stops were brief, and the warriors went to sleep beside their horses.

At night scouts roamed ahead with flaming torches. They climbed hills, giving signals with their flames to keep the detachments from losing their way or intermixing. Word had it that among the enemy Muslim troops the Turkmen warriors on their long-legged steeds distinguished themselves. Like leopards they would come flying from behind the hills, cut into the ranks and wreak havoc, then disappear just as quickly, hauling away prisoners on lassoes.

At first the Mongols assumed their army was moving across the desert straight for Gurganj, the capital of Khorezm. But after two days on the road, when the muddy waters of the Saihun were left behind, and the sun rose not at their backs but to the left, everyone realized that their horses' heads were turned not to the west but to the south, toward the renowned cities of Samarkand and Bukhara.

Jenghiz Khan rode amidst his warriors on a sorrel ambler with sturdy black legs and a black stripe down its back. The whole troop moved at a rapid trot, *ayan*, or "wolf's gait", as the Tatars called it. The great kagan sat on his horse, imperturbable, impenetrable, holding the loose reins in his left hand; his eyes were squinted, occasionally opening into narrow slits, and it was impossible to tell whether he was dozing, thinking his own

¹*Takyrs* — spots of clayey earth not covered by sand.

thoughts or in fact keenly surveying everything near and far, catching everything and forgetting nothing.

Jenghiz Khan allowed for no delays in this campaign; he had no yurts put up for himself, but slept on a folded felt mat. Before going to sleep he would take off his leather helmet and don a sable-lined cap with ear-flaps. He dozed while four trusted bodyguards sat near him, protecting the kagan from wind, rain and snow with a thick felt cloth.

Chapter Seven

IN BESIEGED BUKHARA

At a time when severity is called for, lenience is inappropriate. Lenience will not make a friend out of an enemy, but merely increase his claims.

Saadi

All day the dervish Haji Rakhim, the boy Tugan and Kurban-Kyzyk wandered about Bukhara, searching in vain for a place to spend the night. Toward nightfall the doors of shops clattered loudly as they were closed for the night, people hastily dispersed and vanished from the streets, hiding behind the high solid walls. The three travelers asked for shelter for the night, but to no avail; they heard always the same reply:

"We have guests enough as is, look somewhere else!"

The inns and taverns, where owners asked a handful of dirhams just for the privilege of spending the night sitting in a room packed full of refugees, also closed down for the night. The keepers of peace and morality, along with the sentries, armed with long sticks, combed the streets, threatening to throw suspicious-looking people who wandered the streets with dishonorable intentions into the "dungeon of retribution".

Finally, in the depths of a narrow alley, where dilapidated huts huddled together by the fortress wall, Kurban-Kyzyk suggested they climb atop the flat roof of a house and seek cover there in the heap of brushwood and straw. He climbed up first, then helped his companions. They hid there, nestling close to one another and covering themselves with the dervish's wide cloak.

That night they were chilled by a cold wind that scattered snow dust. The humming of the city could be heard for quite some time, gradually abating, until all was quiet. Now only the rattle of the night sentries and the barking of dogs sounded from various parts of town.

The next day, when the muezzins chanted their calls to morning prayers from the height of the slender minarets, the three friends climbed up to the city's high wall, where its dwellers, alarmed and frightened, were rushing.

On the plain before the east gates, a yellow tent of unprecedented size stood out on a lone knoll. Dense groups of horsemen were moving around the tent. They raced about the fields in independent detachments, skirting the city wall. Their appearance was strange to the natives of Bukhara; their small horses galloped with the speed of rabid boars, turned easily and stopped short, only to race off again in a different direction. Their metal helmets and the iron chainmail flashed in the sun's rays that pierced the clouds of dust. New cavalry detachments were driving a mob of several thousand civilians with hoes and poles on their shoulders.

"Who are these strange people on the little horses?" asked Kurban-Kyzyk.

"What a question!" said a sullen warrior, pounding the ground with his spear. "Don't you see that they are not one of ours, not Muslims? They have come, the Yajuji and Majuji, whom people call Tatars. And there in that yellow tent, laughing at the sight of us, sits their chief khan — may Allah strike him dead!"

Kurban-Kyzyk exclaimed, "The gates of the city are closed! Now they will not let me out! What will become of my poor children? I might have to stay here a whole year!"

Along the wall came an important leader — a *hajib* — in a steel helmet and silvery mail. Kurban, folding his hands on his chest, ran up to him and, kissing the hem of his clothes, said, "Oh, great bek jigít Inanch Khan, do you recognize me? I am your farm-hand, your tenant Kurban-Kyzyk! *Salam!*"

"Why are you here and not with your hundred?"

"At the padishah's order I came to Bukhara on foot to fight with the infidels. Along the way my mare was stolen — may Allah strike the thief with lightning! I have

wandered here for two whole days now trying to find the one who will be my commander. But no one will even speak with me. If no one can be bothered with a warrior who has come here to lay down his head for the padishah, then who is to fight these Yajuji?"

"I am pleased to hear such valorous words, Kurban-Kyzyk," said Inanch Khan. "I see you have strong hands and a hump on your back from diligent work in the fields. You can become a great hero at war. I will take you into my detachment. Follow me."

And so Kurban parted company with the dervish and his companion Tugan.

Following Inanch Khan, Kurban came to a square where horses stood tethered, fires smouldered, rice boiled in pots and the smell of lamb's fat filled the air. "Here they do not just drive men to slaughter; they feed them as well," Kurban thought happily.

"Aye-yea, warrior Oraz!" cried Inanch Khan addressing a tall sullen Turkmen with a black beard, who bowed at the sight of his superior. "The brave soldier Kurban-Kyzyk is joining your command. He worked well in the fields and he will be a good jigit in battle."

"Shall I put him on a horse or will he fight on foot?"

"Give him a sabre, a steed and everything else necessary. May Allah come to your aid!" And Inanch Khan was gone.

Oraz was the commander of ten horsemen. They all sat in a circle near the campfire. One, who had a large wooden spoon in his hand, said in reply to Kurban's greeting, "How fine that you brought such a big spear. I haven't enough wood to cook the pilaf." With that he took Kurban's heavy spear, chopped the staff into small pieces with his axe and tossed them into the fire.

"This will be your horse," said Oraz and led Kurban over to a tall grey stallion tethered at a distance from the other horses. "He is a hot one, and don't you approach him from behind — he'll kill you! — but only from the front, and grab his reins immediately. But he will get used to you. There's just one problem — this steed does not stay in file, but flies ahead, especially when we are charging at a gallop. Therefore do not let up on the reins, or in battle he will carry you right into the Tatars' midst."

Kurban hesitantly approached the horse, who reacted by laying back its ears, baring its teeth and bucking. "Allah help me," thought Kurban and returned to the campfire. Oraz gave him a big old sabre and worn yellow riding boots, and invited him to share their supper. At last Kurban felt that he had become a real jigit warrior just like the others.

Toward evening all the warriors gave their horses plenty of barley and then filled their saddle-bags. Kurban did the same.

"Now the hard work will begin!" said Oraz and cried, "To your horses!"

Everyone mounted. With some difficulty Kurban clambered up onto his restive stallion and along with the others set out along the narrow streets of Bukhara.

"There will be a sortie," said the jigit beside him. "Who knows how many of us will come back..."

The detachment came to a halt near the city gates. There was a square here where other detachments began to arrive, and all told, nearly five thousand horsemen gathered.

The commanders of detachments rode up to Inanch Khan and he gave them the following instructions:

"We shall attack the yellow tent, where the Tatar kagan is sitting. Kill everyone! Take no prisoners! We will cause commotion in the Tatar camp, and our other troops will easily finish the pagans off. May Allah help the brave!"

The heavy forged gates opened, and the horsemen began leaving the city. When Kurban found himself in the field, he saw in the twilight only the shadows of the jigits riding before him, and in the distance the countless fires of the Tatar camp. The horses broke into a trot, then increased their pace to a gallop. Kurban tried to hold the grey stallion back, but it raced on, taking the bit between its teeth, and began overtaking the neighboring jigits with ease.

Five thousand horsemen advanced on the Tatar camp like an avalanche, charging into the rows of campfires with a terrible roar, running people down, leaping over the packs and saddles that lay strewn about.

The Tatars, mounting their horses, scattered in all directions. Kurban charged between horsemen, brandish-

ing his heavy old sabre and shouting; he hit someone, knocked someone else off his feet, and was ready to ride straight for the yellow tent of the chief Tatar khan. But suddenly he noticed that his entire detachment had turned and raced off to the side rather than pursue the Tatars. His grey steed charged after the other horses, and Kurban prayed to Allah to keep him from flying into a ditch along with his horse.

The horses raced on for a long time, then, slowing down, they gradually fell into a trot, and the detachment moved along the main road leading from Bukhara to the west.

The men rode calmly through the night. In the morning Inanch Khan called to a halt.

"We will let our horses rest, then we will go on to the river Jaihun, cross it and move on to join the troops of the Khorezm Shah."

At that moment they heard noise and desperate howls — the Tatars appeared in the distance. They charged on the resting camp with blood-curdling war cries. The Bukhara warriors barely had time to leap on their horses, and, having lost their courage, they fled without a fight, thus ensuring their own ruin. The detachment was destroyed by the Tatars nearly in its entirety.

A poet said, "He who lives in fear of death will be caught by it anyway, even if he tries to climb to the very heavens to escape it!"

Chapter Eight

BUKHARA SURRENDERS WITHOUT A FIGHT

He who does not gallantly defend his water reservoir with arms will have it destroyed. He who attacks others will suffer humiliation.

An Arab saying

When the five thousand men of Inanch Khan, instead of defending noble Bukhara exchanged military valor for the disgrace of flight, the city's most distinguished beks, imams, scholarly ulems and the wealthiest merchants gathered in the central mosque. They conferred for a long

time and decided, "A bowed head will sooner survive than a disobedient one. Therefore we shall enter the service of Jenghiz Khan."

"People are people everywhere," they said. The Tatar khan will hear our pleas, will have regard for the grey-bearded elders and will most likely treat mercifully the inhabitants of an ancient city, renowned as a 'bright star in the heavens of enlightenment'."

Donning silk and brocade robes and bearing on a silver platter the golden keys to the eleven gates of the city, the beks, imams, ulems and merchants left the gates in a throng and started toward the yellow tent. The kagan's head interpreter immediately rode up to meet them. Some of the old men recognized him. He had once been a wealthy merchant in Gurganj. Mahmud-Yalvach was an acclaimed interpreter, for during his long journeys with caravans he had learned many foreign languages.

The most distinguished of the elders said:

"The ancient walls of our city are so sturdy and tall that they can be taken only after many years' siege and extreme efforts. Therefore, in order to save the population from bloodshed and not cause excessive misfortunes and losses to the brave army of the great padishah Jenghiz Khan, we offer to surrender our city without a fight if the Mongol sovereign gives his word to spare the submissive."

"Wait!" said the interpreter. He started leisurely back to the yellow tent and, again leisurely, returned to the elders, who were trembling with fear.

"Listen, grey-bearded ones, to what the great kagan said: 'The strength and the invulnerability of city walls is equal to the courage and strength of its defenders. If you surrender without a fight, then I command you to open the gates and wait.'"

The distinguished and arrogant old men clutched their beards and, shaking their heads exchanged glances. They returned to the city with bewilderment in their hearts, not knowing what trials awaited its inhabitants.

The ancient walls of Bukhara were so high and strong that they could protect its civilian population for many months. But that day only the voices of the fainthearted were heard; those who demanded a fight were deemed insane.

The head of defense and the warriors remaining with him cursed the imams and the distinguished elders for having surrendered the keys to the city's gates to the infidels, and they determined to fight to their last breath. They locked themselves up in the fortress that towered in the middle of Shahrستان.

All eleven of the city's gates opened at once, and thousands of Tatars came pouring into the narrow streets. They moved in perfect order, and each of the various detachments occupied a particular quarter.

The inhabitants, clambering up to the flat roofs, looked with horror upon the beardless horsemen astride small horses with long manes. Utter quiet settled over the city. Only the yellow, pointy-faced mongrels, fur on end and red-eyed, jumped wildly from rooftop to rooftop, barking relentlessly as they caught the sharp odor of the unknown people.

Once the Mongols had penetrated all the main streets, a detachment of bodyguards appeared on white steeds, covered with armor down to their knees, man and horse alike.

At the center of this select thousand was the sovereign of the East himself, risen up out of the sands of the Kyzyl-Kum like a pillar of fire. At the head rode a mighty Mongol warrior bearing a great banner with nine fluttering tails. Behind him two horsemen led an unsaddled white stallion with fiery black eyes. Next came the great kagan in long black dress riding a broad-chested sorrel with an ordinary leather bridle.

Jenghiz Khan rode sullen, big and round-shouldered, wearing a leather belt hung with a curved sabre in a black sheath. A black helmet with a low back and a steel arrow-shaped nose guard, a dark impassive face with a long greying beard and half-closed eyes — all this was unusual and unlike the accustomed bright splendor of the gold-covered, diamond-studded Khorezm shahs.

Jenghiz Khan reached the main square, where his mounted bodyguards lined up in ranks on three sides, holding back the mob. The supreme clergy and law officials and the city's most distinguished citizens stood on the steps of the high mosque.

When the Mongol sovereign approached the mosque, the entire mob fell to the ground, to the hooves of the

sorrel, as they were accustomed to doing before their padishah. Only a few old ulems stood upright, their hands folded on their stomachs, released by virtue of their learning of the obligation to fall prostrate before their sovereign.

"Long live the padishah Jenghiz Khan! Prosperity to the Sun of the East!" rang out the shrill voice of one old man, and the entire crowd took up the cry in a discordant chorus.

Squinting, Jenghiz Khan fixed his gaze on the high arch of the mosque and, with a crack of his whip, steered his horse up the stone steps.

"Is this the tall house of the ruler of the city?" asked the kagan.

"No, it is the house of Allah," replied the imams.

Surrounded by bodyguards, Jenghiz Khan rode into the mosque across the wide precious carpets and dismounted beside the huge Koran that lay open on a stone pedestal taller than a man. With his youngest son Tule Khan the kagan climbed up a few steps to the mimbar, the place from which the imams usually read the prayers. Old men in white and green turbans crowded around before them and stared wide-eyed at the dark, impassive face with the stiff red beard, awaiting either mercy or great wrath from the terrible exterminator of peoples.

Jenghiz Khan raised a finger and pointed it at the turban of one of the imams.

"Why does he wind so much cloth around his head?"

The interpreter asked the old man and explained to the kagan, "This imam says that he has been to Mecca to pray to Allah and visit the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore he wears such a large turban."

"There's no reason to go somewhere for this," said Jenghiz Khan. "God can be worshipped anywhere."

The astounded imams stood open-mouthed and said nothing. Jenghiz Khan went on, "Your shah has perpetrated innumerable crimes. I have come like a scourge from the skies to punish him. From now on no one may give Muhammad anything, neither shelter nor a handful of flour — this is our order."

Jenghiz Khan climbed two steps higher and cried out from there to his warriors crowding in the doors of the mosque:

"Listen, my invincible warriors! The grain has been taken from the fields, and there is no place for our horses to graze. But the grainaries are full here and they are open to us. Fill your horses' bellies with grain!"

The Mongols' cries resounded throughout the square, "The grainaries of Bukhara are open to us! The great kagan has ordered us to feed our horses grain."

Descending from the mimbar, Jenghiz Khan ordered, "Have a warrior assigned to each of these old men, and without concealing anything they will point out to us the wealthy homes, the grainaries and the shops. Have the scribes learn from these old men and record the names of all the wealthy traders, and they shall return to me all the riches confiscated from my merchants, killed in Otrar. Have these rich men bring food and drink here — enough to satiate my men, make them so merry that they sing and dance. Today I shall celebrate the capture of Bukhara in this home of the Muslim god."

The old men left with the Mongol warriors and soon began returning with camels loaded with copper kettles, sacks of rice, lamb carcasses and jugs full of honey, oil and aged wine.

Chapter Nine

"HOW FINE IN THE STEPPES OF KERULEN!"

Fires came ablaze in the square before the central mosque, while fat sheep's tails, rice and bits of mutton began sizzling in pots.

Jenghiz Khan sat atop silk pillows on a high platform before the entrance to the mosque. Military commanders and bodyguards crowded around him. Off to one side Bukhara musicians and a choir of girls from different tribes, brought here by the elders of Bukhara, played various instruments and beat a tattoo on tambourines and drums.

The most notable imams and ulems tended to the Mongols' horses, tossing them bales of hay. Jenghiz Khan's interpreter Mahmud-Yalvach sat near the kagan, keeping an alert eye on everything; behind him three scribes from among his former shop assistants sat on their heels

quickly recording on smooth colored paper orders or passes through Mongol posts.

A Mongol in a floor-length fur coat, fully armed, made his way through the rows of seated men and, bending down to Mahmud-Yalvach's ear, whispered:

"My patrol detained two people — one something like a shaman, in a tall cap, the other a boy. When we went to finish them off, the elder one said in our tongue, 'Do not touch us! Muhmud-Yalvach is our foster father...' Since we were ordered to spare shamans and witch-doctors, I ordered my men to leave them alone for the time being. What will you have me do with them?"

"Bring them here!.."

The Mongol led in Haji Rakhim and the boy Tugan. Mahmud-Yalvach indicated to them to sit down on the carpet beside the scribes.

Jenghiz Khan never lost clarity of mind, even at feasts where there was much drinking; nothing escaped his notice. He made a sign to Mahmud-Yalvach with his eyes, and the latter went over to him.

"Who are these people?"

"When at your will I was riding across the desert and was wounded by bandits, this man brought me back to life. Is it not my duty to look after him?"

"I give you permission to exalt him for this. Explain to me why he wears such a tall cap."

"He is a Muslim seeker of knowledge and a singer. He speaks the truth and can spin like a top. The simple folk respect his kind and give them gifts."

"Let him spin like a top before me. I will see how Muslims dance."

Mahmud-Yalvach returned to his place and said to the dervish, "Our ruler has ordered you to show him how spinning dervishes dance. You know that if you do not carry out Jenghiz Khan's will, you will be killed. Try hard, and I shall play for you."

Haji Rakhim laid his bag, bowl and staff down on the carpet. He walked obediently to the center of the circle, surrounded by blazing fires. He assumed the pose traditional for the dervishes of Bagdad: arms extended, the right with the palm down and the left, palm up. The dervish waited for a few moments. Mahmud-Yalvach began to play a plaintive tune on a reed pipe, alternating

between the sound of a whimpering child and the alarmed cry of an oriole. The musicians beat the tambourines softly. The dervish moved noiselessly around the circle, gliding along the old stone slabs, and simultaneously began to spin, slowly at first, then gradually picking up speed; his long clothes billowed out like a bubble. The reed pipe played with ever increasing melancholy and alarm, then it would fall silent and only the tambourines droned, then it would begin to whine once more.

At last the dervish began spinning fast in one place, like a top, and fell flat on his palms.

The nukers picked him up and laid him down near the scribes. Jenghiz Khan said, "I shall favor this Bukhara dancer with a goblet of wine so that reason will return to his dizzy head. Still, our Mongol dancers jump higher and sing songs both louder and gayer. Now we would like to hear Mongol singers."

Two Mongols, one old and one young, stepped into the center of the circle. They sat down facing each other, cross-legged. The young one began to sing:

*Remembering their native herds back home,
They stamp the earth and they neigh, poor mares,
Remembering their beloved mothers back home,
They shed bitter tears and they sigh, maidens fare.*

All the Mongols, sitting in a tight circle around them, took up the refrain in chorus:

Oh, my riches! Oh, my glory!

The old Mongol sang in turn:

*The speed of our desert steeds you shall know,
When you charge over barrows like the wind,
The valor of desert warriors you shall know,
When you follow the kagan to the world's end.*

And again all the Mongols took up the refrain:

Oh, my riches! Oh, my glory!

The young singer went on:

*If you sit astride a steed intrepid,
Near will become all distant reaches,
And when you rout the foe intrepid,
You will see the end of wars and breaches.*

The Mongols repeated the refrain once more, and the old Mongol sang:

*Every last soul who has seen Jenghiz Khan,
Knows the world holds no warrior more grand,
Let us render glory to Jenghiz Khan
In song and by bearing gifts in hand!*

"Let us render glory to Jenghiz Khan!" the Mongols cried. "And today we shall make merry!" the crowd chimed in. With this all those present broke into whistles, cheering and clapping.

Some dancers made their way to the center of the circle and formed two rows, face to face. Accompanied by song and the clamor of tambourines they began dancing in place, imitating the ways of a bear, rolling over, stamping their feet and striking each other deftly with their soles. Drawing their swords in unison, they began waving them around jumping high, the steel blades flashing in the red glow of the flames.

Jenghiz Khan, taking hold of his stiff red beard with his broad hand, sat silent and motionless, his unblinking eyes burning like coals.

The dancing and shouting stopped. A new singer took up a sad, solemn song, the favorite song of Jenghiz Khan.

*We do recall
The Mongol steppe,
The blue Kerulen,
The golden Onon!
Three times thirty
Tribes unruly
Lie trampled in dust
By our Mongol troops.*

*Menace and fire
We bring on nations,
Brandishing death
Are Jenghiz Khan's sons.*

*The sands of forty
Deserts behind us
Are stained by the blood
Of the slain.
"Slaughter them, slaughter them,
Young and old!
Over the universe
The Mongol whip cracks!"
Came the cry
Like the sparks of a flame
Of the red-bearded lash of the sky
Jenghiz Khan.*

*He said: "Your mouths
I shall fill with sugar!
Your bellies I'll clothe
In silks and brocade!
All is mine! All is mine!
I know not fear!
All the world
I shall strap to my saddle!"
Onward, onward,
You sure-footed steeds!*

*Nations tremble in fear
Your mere shadow instills...
We shall not check, we shall not check
This stormy pursuit
Till we've washed
Our frothy steeds
In the last waves
Of the Last Sea...*

Jenghiz Khan swayed as he listened to his favorite song, singing along in his low, hoarse voice. Big tears rolled down his cheeks and his stiff red beard. He dried them with the hem of his sable mantle and tossed the singer a gold dinar. The latter caught it deftly and fell prostrate, kissing the ground. Jenghiz Khan said:

"After this song about faraway Kerulen sadness gnaws at my liver... I want to be cheered! Aye-yea, Mahmud-Yalvach! Order these maidens to sing pleasant songs that will make me merry!"

*Black smoke billowed high, shrouding the heavens
above.
But the piteous sobs of children and captive wives
resound:
And brothers and fathers — all have fallen in battle!*

Again the choir of maidens repeated the refrain:

*But the piteous sobs of children and captive wives
resound:
Wa-a! Wa-a! Wa-a!*

And again all the Bukhara elders joined in with a desperate wail:

O Khorezm! O Khorezm!

Only one native of Khorezm, Mahmud-Yalvach, sat in silence, looking askance at the old men, cold and cautious.

"What is this boy singing?" asked Jenghiz Khan, still sobbing. "And why do the old men wail so?"

"They are singing the way you like," explained Mahmud-Yalvach. "This song mourns the death of their homeland. All the old men moan, 'O Khorezm!' and cry because their former glory is gone..."

Jenghiz Khan's dark face contracted into a network of wrinkles, and his mouth spread into something like a smile. All at once he burst into laughter, like the barking of a big old wolfhound, and slapped his protruding belly.

"Now that's a happy song for me! The lad wails well, just as though he were crying! Let the whole universe weep when the great Jenghiz Khan laughs!.. When I pin a disobedient head under my knee, I like to watch my enemy moan and plea for mercy, while tears of despair trickle down his gaunt cheeks...¹ I like such a plaintive song! I want to hear it often... Where is this boy from?"

"It is not a boy, but the Bukhara girl, Bent-Zankija.

¹From Rashid al-Din's historical chronicles. Rashid al-Din (1247-1318) was a Persian scholar and statesman; the author of an encyclopaedia on natural sciences, works on history, medicine, botany and construction techniques. — *Ed.*

She can read and write well and therefore wears a turban, wound just as the scholarly scribes wind them... She aided the shah's bookcopier."

"Such a girl is a rare prisoner! Let her always sing her plaintive song at my feasts, that all the Muslims may weep and I be merry! We order all the maidens captured in Bukhara distributed among my men, and this girl taken everywhere I go."

"Your will be done, great one!"

Jenghiz Khan rose. The Mongols sitting around stood up at once and emptied their unfinished goblets on the ground "in honor of the god of victory".

"I am moving on," said Jenghiz Khan. "Bring me my horse. Tair Khan will remain in this city as governor, and you all must obey him."

Jenghiz Khan, lit up by the glow of the fires and the pale light of the half-moon, mounted his broad-chested sorrel. His bodyguards dashed between the fires to their horses, tended by the Bukhara elders, and in a few moments the cavalcade crossed the square, the horses' hooves clacking on the stone tiles, and disappeared down a dark street.

BOOK TWO

UNDER THE MONGOL LASH

Part One

HURRICANE OVER KHOREZM

Chapter One

WOE UNTO THEM WHO THROW DOWN THEIR ARMS!

Either we crush our enemy's head on a rock or he
will hang us from the city walls.

From an ancient Persian poem

A strict order established by Jenghiz Khan was observed in the Mongol army. Every man knew his place in his group of ten, one hundred and one thousand; thousands of warriors were gathered into large detachments, headed by commanders who received special orders from those in charge of the right or left wing of the troops, if not from the Mongol kagan himself.

Mongol warriors raced down all the streets of the wealthy and populous city of Bukhara. With them were mediators from among the Bukhara elders and interpreters from among Muslim merchants who had once traded in Mongol camps. The interpreters proclaimed the ordinances of the city's new rulers to the inhabitants, locked up, terrified, in their homes, and in the meantime sentries appeared on street corners to maintain order.

The Mongol ruler of the city, Tair Khan, took up residence in the central mosque, where, in accordance with Jenghiz Khan's order, the Bukhara elders had been convened. They presented detailed lists of all the wealthy inhabitants of the city, indicated the secret warehouses of food supplies, once set aside for the Khorezm Shah's army,

as well as the private stores and shops with valuable goods.

Loaded pack camels, horses and carts moved to the central square from all corners of the city. The frightened citizens brought sacks of grain, mounds of fabric, clothes, rugs, valuable vessels, foodstuffs and other wares. All this was piled in the mosques, and a third of all goods was set aside for the Mongol sovereign Jenghiz Khan.

Those subjects able to work were sent to fill up the deep moat around the citadel, where the unsubmissive Ikhtiar-Kushlu was holding out. He and his men had determined not to surrender and fight to the last breath. Among the defenders of the fortress were other khans, one of them being the mighty Mongol warrior Gurhan, who had fled from Jenghiz Khan and gone over to the service of the Khorezm Shah.

The Mongols watched thousands of young and old Bukharians work, filling the deep moat with earth and logs, and hurried them. After two days it was possible to approach the high walls of the fortress, at the top of which stood its armed defenders.

"We have done our work quickly," said the people of Bukhara. "Now we shall see how quickly the Mongols can clamber up these high walls."

At the order of the Mongols the Bukhara carpenters put together many long ladders. Then the Mongols lunged at the crowd, lashing at it viciously with their whips.

"What are you waiting for? What are you looking at? Put up the ladders and climb up the walls."

No one dared approach the wall, from which the defenders were hurling bricks and pouring tar and boiling water.

But the Mongols, drawing their sabres, drove their horses into the reluctant crowd, and finally began beating them mercilessly over the head. The people of Bukhara surged forward, shielding themselves with their arms. The Mongols went on swinging their sabres, hacking off fingers and hands.

The interpreters tried to persuade the mob to climb the walls.

Some of the citizens cried, "To climb the walls means death, and to stay here also means death! Let us climb up there. Perhaps our men will have mercy on us and stop fighting!"

So they took the ladders, placed them against the walls and started up with cries of, "We are Muslims just like you. Lay down your arms and surrender."

The warriors who were at the top allowed them to get close, then showered them with stones and logs, and sent the ladders toppling over backwards. They shouted in reply, "You are cowardly dogs! Go back, beat the Mongols! Look — we are dying as martyrs but we are not giving up! Do not submit to the enemy!"

The Mongol warrior Gurhan, standing on the wall, hurled heavy rocks and cried, "Why are the Mongols hiding behind the backs of these submissive sheep? Let them be the first to demonstrate their courage. And where has the sour-pussed old man Jenghiz Khan got to, that red dog, devourer of infants?"

Gurhan fought desperately with his sabre, and when it broke, with an axe, knocking down those who climbed up, until the Mongols pierced him with their arrows.

In the meantime the Mongols positioned the Chinese catapults. They hurled great fiery arrows coated with oakum and tar, and pots of flammable liquid into the fortress. Fires raged inside.

The siege of the citadel lasted for twelve days. At last, having killed nearly all the defenders, the Mongols stormed into the fortress and seized the few who remained, covered with wounds and burns. They were astounded to learn that the citadel had been defended from the great Mongol army by a mere four hundred men. They died but they did not submit. If all the inhabitants had so staunchly defended their city from behind its high sturdy walls, the Mongols would not have succeeded in taking ancient Bukhara in half a year or even a year, and the Bukharians would not have known the dreadful lot they brought upon themselves.

Once the people of Bukhara had delivered their gifts to the Mongols, filling all the mosques of the city, a new order was issued:

"All inhabitants, including women and children, must exit the city and go out into the fields, leaving all their belongings in their homes and taking nothing with them but the clothes on their backs!"

The interpreters explained to them, "Do not worry —

sentries are everywhere. Your belongings will be properly guarded. You are being told to go out into the fields in order to enable the Mongols to count and register the population for correct taxing. He who evades the order and remains in the city will be killed on the spot."

In the morning all the people of Bukhara began vacating the city en masse. Fathers led their children by the hand, wives carried their babies, even the feeble old men and women who had not ventured from their corners for years, trudged along, clinging to one another.

The Mongol patrols scoured every street, banged on gates and cried, "*Der-hal! Hosh-hal!*"¹

The inhabitants exited through Bukhara's eleven gates and formed a ring around the entire city. The sentries let no one back inside the city.

It then became clear how many people inhabited noble Bukhara — their numbers were two or three times more than those of the Mongols.

First the Mongols, accompanied by the interpreters, went around to all the people asking which of them was a craftsman and what trade he mastered. Experienced craftsmen were put into a special group. Then the strong young men were set apart and encircled by warriors.

Finally the Mongols began selecting handsome women, girls and children and leading them out of the crowd. At this point it became clear to all that they were being separated from their loved ones, probably forever. Shrieks and wails went up, and tears of despair surged forth.

As butchers at a market indifferently select cows lowing or goats bleating piteously and drive them with blows to the slaughter-house, so did the new masters of Bukhara whip those who resisted, caught them by the necks with lassoes and, spurring their horses, yanked them out of the crowd.

Their terror in the face of the Mongols was so great that the Bukharians did not even put up a fight.

Some husbands and fathers, at the sight of their wives or daughters being dragged through the dust behind some Mongol, would rush to their loved ones, mad with grief, in an attempt to save them. But the Mongols trampled

¹*Der-hal! Hosh-hal!* — Move it, and fast!

them underfoot or knocked them to the ground with a blow from a bludgeon.

Amidst the crowd driven from the city were scholars who had spent long years in the madrasah, where they passed on their vast knowledge to their pupils. Two such scholars stood in the crowd, aghast at the incredible violence they saw around them.

"These pagans plunder the mosques, their horses' hooves trample the pages of the great books. They kidnap and trample infants, rape young girls before their fathers," said one. "Can I endure this?"

The second and most renowned scholar in the city, Rukn ed-Din Imam-Zade replied, "Hush! The wind of Allah's wrath is raging! Straw that is being blown away by the wind should not speak."

However, old Rukn ed-Din was unable to maintain his calm and impassivity for long. Seeing how cruelly the Mongols treated the women, Rukn ed-Din and his son interceded for them and were instantly killed. Such was the fate of many others: at the sight of their families shamed and humiliated, they jumped to their defense and were felled by the Mongols' fatal blows.

That was a dark day, drowned in the cries and moans of the dying, the sobs of women and children parted forever from their fathers, husbands and brothers. The men were powerless to help in any way, and the words of the poet came back to mind, "He who wishes not to cling tight to the sword's black hilt will fall victim to the sword's sharp blade."

The Mongols returned to the deserted streets of the city. As they entered the houses and were loading their horses with the plundered goods, the city burst into flame from all ends at once. Tongues of fire and black smoke rose up over ancient Bukhara, shrouding the sun in darkness. The structures were fragile, made of wood and clay, and the city quickly became one gigantic raging fire. Only the central mosque and the walls of a few of the palaces, made of brick, escaped destruction.

The Mongols, trying to save themselves from the rampant fire, bolted from the city, abandoning their loot. For many years afterwards the city remained but a heap of charred ruins, where only owls and jackals sought refuge.

Chapter Two

THE ELDERS OF SAMARKAND BETRAY THE CITY

Everyone is the victim of your debauchery and revelry. You have not henna on your hands — no! — but blood!

Riza Tevfik

Jenghiz Khan set out from Bukhara for Samarkand early in the spring of the Year of the Dragon (1220), his army moving along both banks of the Zeravshan. Showing relative leniency to those who surrendered now, the kagan left a detachment to besiege the cities of Seripul and Dabusiye, which had closed their gates before the Mongols.

Having reached Samarkand, Jenghiz Khan chose to stay in the Khorezm Shah's former country residence known as the Green Palace. The detachments of his four sons began arriving here with their hordes of prisoners, driven like cattle by the Mongols' whips. All these detachments assumed the formation of a solid ring around the city.

Of all the cities of Khorezm, Samarkand was the best fortified. The high old walls of invulnerable thickness had iron gates with towers and loopholes on either side. The garrison numbered one hundred ten thousand soldiers. Of them sixty thousand spoke Turkic dialects — Kipchaks for the most part — while the rest of the troops were made up of Tajiks, Gurtsy, Kara-Kitais and other tribes. There were also twenty ferocious-looking fighting elephants in which the Khorezm Shah had placed great store. In addition, an entire army could have been put together from the civilian population, made up of craftsmen and their numerous slaves.

Had an experienced and indomitable commander such as Kair Khan or Timur-Melik been put in charge of the defense of Samarkand, the city would have held out for a long time — no less than a year — for as long as the food supplies lasted. But the Khorezm Shah appointed his uncle, the arrogant Tugai Khan, brother of the shah's hated mother Turkan-Khatun, who lacked military experience, commander-in-chief of the troops of Samarkand.

For two days Jenghiz Khan rode around the city surveying the walls, ramparts and deep moats, which were filled to the top with water; he looked for weak spots and contemplated a plan of attack.

In order to conceal their true strength and frighten the besieged inhabitants, the Mongols arranged the prisoners in military formation, with one banner for every ten men. From afar, it appeared to the inhabitants of Samarkand that the city was surrounded by an innumerable army of enemies.

The Turkic commanders Ali-Er Khan, Siyunj Khan and Balan Khan charged through the city gates with their detachments of Kipchaks and attacked the Mongols. Fierce battles ensued. Although the Muslims did succeed in taking a few Mongols prisoner, they lost close to a thousand of their own men and had to return to the safety of the fortress walls.

The next day the Kipchak warriors did not wish to leave the city. Volunteers from among Samarkand's civilian population staged a surprise attack. The Mongols broke into mock flight. The Muslims charged after them and were caught in an ambush: warriors swept down on them from all sides, cutting off their retreat, and killed nearly all of them. But a handful returned to the city.

On the morning of the third day Jenghiz Khan mounted his horse and personally led the assault on Samarkand. He placed all his troops around the walls and opposite all the gates. They attacked those who left the city, piercing them with arrows from their great, taut long-distance bows; they fought with the brave men all day until nightfall, and then both sides returned to their camps.

That night, the most distinguished citizens of Samarkand — the supreme judge, the head of the clergy, Sheikul-Islam, and the eldest keepers of the mosques — imams — held a nocturnal conference, having decided to surrender. The next morning they left the city and set out for the kagan's camp. They wanted to apply to the Mongol sovereign for mercy on the besieged city. Jenghiz Khan "promised them safety from his wrath and allowed them to return to their homes". Joyfully, the delegation went back to the city. Then, with the exception of one brave detachment that held out in the citadel, the

Kipchak khans, led by the commander-in-chief Tugai Khan, also hastened to bow down before the Mongols and offer themselves into their service. To which Jenghiz Khan, chuckling graciously, agreed.

On the morning of the sixth day of the siege the main "Namaz¹ Gates" swung open and the Mongols burst into the capital of the Khorezm Shah. They drove forth the prisoners and ordered them to destroy the walls.

However, contrary to Jenghiz Khan's promises not to bring harm to the city, all the men and women of Samarkand, divided into groups of one hundred, were driven out to the fields, where the Mongols robbed everything they had and subjected them to violence. An exception was made for but a very few persons indicated by the traitors, the supreme judge and Sheik-ul-Islam. These people the Mongols did not touch.

It was announced to the population that the Mongols had been given a free hand to shed the blood of anyone found hiding in his home once all the inhabitants had been ordered out to the fields. Taking advantage of this decree, the Mongols slaughtered a multitude of civilians.

The Kipchak army of thirty thousand warriors, along with their wives and children, headed by the Khorezm Shah's uncle Tugai Khan, left the city in order to serve the enemy. The Mongols ordered them to lay down their arms, promising to replace them with those of the Mongol type. They announced that the Kipchaks who had entered the service of Jenghiz Khan must also conform in appearance. Thus their heads were shaved to make them resemble Mongol warriors. The Mongols assigned them a particular valley for their camp site. The Kipchaks put up their tents and settled there along with their families. But the next day the Mongols staged a sudden onslaught and massacred them all, confiscating their possessions. Survivors said about the slaughtered Kipchaks, "They found not the courage to fight nor even to flee."

That night a thousand daring jigits from the garrison holding out in the citadel escaped, led by Ali-Er Khan. They bravely cut through the Mongol ranks and, taking advantage of the darkness, slipped away. They later joined up with the army of Jelal ed-Din.

¹*Namaz* or *Salah* — one of the five daily prayers of a Muslim. — *Ed.*

The remaining defenders of the fortress continued to fight. Then the Mongols destroyed the dam across the Jekerdiz canal, which had a bed made skillfully of lead. The water flooded the area around the citadel and undermined the walls, making it possible for the Mongols to penetrate the citadel and slay everyone they found there.

Of the inhabitants driven out to the fields, the Mongols picked out the skilled craftsmen in order to send them to faraway Mongolia. These craftsmen were renowned for their expertise in the manufacture of white cloth paper, brocade, shiny silk fabrics, shawls, tanned leather goods, bridles, large copper pots, silver and metal goblets, scissors, needles, arms, bows, quivers and a multitude of other prized items. All the master craftsmen were given over as slaves to the sons and relatives of Jenghiz Khan and sent off to Mongolia, where they later formed special artisan settlements. On several subsequent occasions the Mongols exported many artisans and strong young workers from Samarkand, depleting its population and that of the surrounding regions for a long time to come.

After the capture of the Samarkand citadel Jenghiz Khan rode through the city, where corpses lay piled everywhere, and then returned to the Green Palace. Its shady gardens abated the commencing heat, which the Mongol sovereign could not tolerate. What's more, the horrible stench of the decomposing bodies made it impossible for him to stay in the city, from which all the remaining inhabitants had fled.

Chapter Three

THE KHOREZM SHAH FINDS PEACE NOWHERE

When a man loses heart his steed cannot gallop.

An Eastern saying

While the Mongols were plundering the land of Khorezm, Shah Muhammad was far away. With a small detachment, he was occupying the city of Kelif on the river Jaihun, waiting to see what would happen next.

"My goal," he said, "is to keep the Mongols from crossing the river Jaihun. Soon I will put together a huge army in Persia and then I will drive those dreadful pagans away."

At the top of a cliff jutting into the river rose a narrow tower with small, flat-roofed huts adjoining. An ancient stone wall surrounded them in a crooked ring.

Here the Khorezm Shah resided in a state of reflective melancholy. A sentry patrolled on the tower roof continuously, gazing to the north. Fires burned on the distant hills by night, while by day pillars of smoke indicated the movements of the enemy troops.

Sometimes Muhammad descended to the river, where cumbersome boats with raised bows bobbed up and down in the water. The shah gazed at the swift, cloudy water, compressed between high cliffs on either side. A large part of his army gradually made its way to the opposite bank of the Jaihun, where structures of the ancient city of Kelif could be discerned among the hills. The invincible Iskender and his warriors, tying inflated goat skins to their chests, had once swum across the narrow, rushing river at this spot.

When the siege of Samarkand began, the Khorezm Shah twice dispatched help to the besieged: first ten, then twenty thousand horsemen, but neither detachment dared approach the capital and returned to Kelif, declaring that the fall of Samarkand was imminent and any attempt to help would be futile.

Inanch Khan arrived in Kelif with two hundred exhausted and wounded horsemen from the detachment that had left Bukhara in the night. The Tatars had chased it down on the bank of the Jaihun and killed nearly all the men — but a few survived. Among them was Kurban-Kyzyk.

The Khorezm Shah was in a state of shock after learning that the large troop left to defend Bukhara had perished in vain and without glory. For some time the shah could neither think nor issue orders. He also noticed that the khans of the neighboring areas had begun to ignore his orders and would not respond to his summons. Reports of treason on the part of his sovereigns and mass defection to the side of Jenghiz Khan poured in from all directions. The Khorezm Shah saw that the order he had established was collapsing, the bases of his power crumbling, while acts of loyalty and obedience were growing few and far between.

Khorezm Shah Muhammad climbed into a large boat.

The jigits loaded it with long leather crates containing his gold and jewels and led the shah's favorite bay stallion aboard. The boat cast off from its home shores. The water carried it swiftly downstream, but the oarsmen worked diligently with the oars and poles, steering the boat in the other direction.

However, they were unable to clear the underwater rocks in order to beach the heavy boat on the Persian bank. So the vekil ordered one of the oarsmen, a tall lean warrior, to carry the shah ashore. The latter hoisted the hefty Muhammad onto his back with a groan and, making his way through the water, brought him to the bank.

When he stood firmly on the rocks the shah asked, "What is your name and where are you from?"

"I am a tiller, the farm-hand Kurban-Kyzyk. I left my family on a scrap of land that Inanch Khan leases to me. And it was with him that I survived after the flight from Bukhara. That night, during the sally, I stood before the yellow tent of the Tatar khan and planned to slaughter him, but for some reason our jigits lost courage and turned in the direction of the Jaihun. And my grey stallion bolted after them like a creature possessed. Then we barely escaped with our lives."

"Why are you called Kurban the Joker?" asked the shah. "Your appearance is not cheerful in the least."

"They call me Kurban the Joker because, to my woe, I speak only the truth, but always at the wrong time. I never know what I should and should not say. That is why I am nicknamed Joker and I am beaten for speaking the truth, though I hit back."

"Have you ever seen me before?"

"No, I have never actually seen you, but I have thought of you often — when the khakim came to beat the taxes out of us he would always say, 'It's for the shah.' So then we would think of you..."

The Khorezm Shah grunted. He asked his vekil for a gold dinar and gave it to Kurban.

"I want this man to remain by my side. He is good at carrying me through the water, and he will always tell me the truth."

"Your wish is my command, great padishah," said Kurban. "There is nothing hard about carrying you — it's just like hauling a big sack of grain. Only permit me to

cross to the other side once more in order to collect my boots."

"I grant you permission."

The padishah mounted his steed and watched Kurban, tall, round-shouldered, with a long thin neck, help carry the valuable leather crates to shore in his wet baggy trousers rolled up past his knees.

Then the boat sailed back to the other side of the river, taking Kurban with it.

While the Khorezm Shah was making his way up a steep road on his bay steed, panic broke out on shore. Everyone pointed to the north, where five dense pillars of smoke were billowing up from the distant hills. This was a dreaded sign: the enemy was approaching in large numbers.

"Set all the boats adrift immediately!" Muhammad commanded. "The Tatars must not be allowed to cross the river!" And the shah spurred his bay steed. Twenty thousand Tatars under the command of Chepe Noyon and Sabutai Bahadar reached the bank of the Jaihun in search of the Khorezm Shah's trail.

No one was there to hinder their crossing. The shore was deserted — the entire population of Kelif had fled. Although there were no boats, the Tatars, carrying out Jenghiz Khan's order "to gallop ahead without stopping", put together something like large wooden water troughs covered them with cowhides and placed their arms and clothing inside. Driving their horses into the water, the Tatars grabbed hold of their tails, fastening these wooden troughs to themselves so that the horse pulled the man and the man pulled the trough.

In this way all the Tatars made their way across the swift Jaihun in one day.¹

But the Khorezm Shah was already far away, moving speedily west.

A large part of the army that followed Muhammad was made up of Kipchaks. They plotted against him. But someone advised the shah to be on his guard. So every night Muhammad would slip, unnoticed, out of the tent where he was supposed to be sleeping. One morning he found his tent riddled with holes from Kipchak arrows.

¹ From Rashid al-Din's historical chronicles.

The Khorezm Shah's fears mounted. He hurried, changing his course en route, knowing not where to seek refuge. Everywhere he persuaded the people to fortify their cities, rely on the strength of the walls and avoid battles. This only increased the terror of the population, and many fled to the mountains.

Only when he arrived in the city of Nishapur, sheltered by mountains, did Muhammad engage in feasts and merry-making, in an effort to drive away his grief.

The Tatars pursued Muhammad relentlessly, questioning everywhere as to his route. When word reached Nishapur that the Mongols were close, the shah announced that he was going hunting, and galloped off with a small detachment, covering up his tracks.

The Tatars charged into Nishapur, having plundered Tus, Zava, Rey and several other towns along the way. They set out from Nishapur in small detachments in different directions in order to discover the Khorezm Shah's path of flight. They robbed every town and village, burned and devastated, sparing no one — neither women nor old people nor children.

Muhammad gathered a sizable army once more. On the Daulatabad plain, in the vicinity of Hamadan, with twenty thousand men, the Khorezm Shah suddenly found himself surrounded by Tatars. They destroyed a large part of his detachment. Muhammad, dressed in peasant clothes, took part in the fighting astride a plain but strong horse. This was the Khorezm Shah's last encounter with the Tatars. Although Mongol forces did not exceed those of the Muslims, the shah was unable to achieve victory, so preoccupied he was with his own salvation.

Several Tatars, failing to recognize the shah, fired their arrows at him, wounding his horse, but Muhammad himself escaped and hid in the mountains. Here the Tatars lost the Khorezm Shah's trail for good.

From there the Tatars continued west, to Zenjan and Kazvin, crushed the Khorezm army under the command of Bek Tegin and Kyuch-Buk Khan and moved across Azerbaijan to the Mugan steppe, where they had clashes with the Georgians.

The Tatars stopped nowhere along their way; they would take only the absolute essentials in food and

clothing, plunder only silver and gold, and set out again. Remembering the import of the business assigned them by Jenghiz Khan, they moved day and night with the shortest of stops, following the trail of Khorezm Shah Muhammad.

In populated areas the Tatars selected the finest horses and galloped ahead. Each soldier rode with a spare horse, while some even had several. The Tatars jumped from one horse to the other on the run, and were therefore able to cover enormous distances each day, appearing suddenly where they were least expected.

Chapter Four

ON AN ISLAND IN THE ABESKUN SEA¹

Who will give me back my troops
And seek revenge for our defeat?
Who will return my lands to me,
Exact them from the enemy?

From a Turkish legend

Shah Muhammad reached the Dianui district and halted in secret near the city of Amol. The local emirs called on him to pay tribute and announce their willingness to serve him. Little was left of the shah's former large retinue. Emaciated, in terrible health, he held council with the old emirs, who enjoyed his trust, and kept repeating, full of despair, "Is there not a peaceful place on earth where I might find refuge from these Tatar lightning bolts?"

Then everyone concluded that it would be best for the shah to get in a boat and find asylum for himself on one of the islands of the Abeskun Sea. Following this advice, the Khorezm Shah moved to a small lone island in the sea, utterly deserted and void of any signs of life.²

Muhammad's sons Ozlag Shah, Ak Shah and Jelal ed-Din soon arrived on the island. Here the Khorezm Shah wrote an order which, in place of the young Ozlag

¹The Abeskun Sea — the Caspian Sea.

²In the thirteenth century the level of the Caspian Sea was lower and there were islands that later disappeared.

Shah, once again named Jelal ed-Din, formerly persecuted and humiliated by his father, heir to the throne.

"Now Jelal ed-Din alone is capable of saving the state," Muhammad admitted. "He does not fear the enemy; on the contrary, he seeks battle with him. I swear that if after Jelal ed-Din's victories Allah returns my might, then charity and truth alone will reign in my lands."

Then the Khorezm Shah girded Jelal ed-Din with his diamond-hilted sword and bestowed upon him the title sultan. He ordered the younger brothers to swear allegiance and obedience to him.

Having received the sword of the Khorezm Shah, Sultan Jelal ed-Din said, "I gain control of the kingdom of Khorezm when it has been seized by Tatars. I take command of troops which now exist in name alone — they are scattered like leaves after a storm. But in this dark night which has descended upon the Muslim lands, I shall light battle fires in the mountains and begin again to gather the brave."

Jelal ed-Din bid his father farewell and started back to engage in new battles. All the others left as well, and Muhammad remained alone on the desert island in the Abeskun Sea.

While the cumbersome tarred boat sailed away from shore, Khorezm Shah Muhammad stood on the sand bar and watched, sullen and pensive. Then the Turkmen oarsmen raised the large grey sail, while the shah's sons and the emir of Astrabad stood in the boat, hands folded on their bellies, not daring to turn away as long as the padishah's gaze was fixed on them.

A gust of wind filled the sail, the boat rocked, and, dipping down into the waves, it began disappearing quickly in the direction of the foggy blue mountains.

Severed now were the Khorezm Shah's last ties with his homeland and his ever discontent, rebellious subjects. He was no longer threatened by Tatar attacks or the somber shadow of the red-bearded Jenghiz Khan. Even the indefatigable Chepe and Sabutai, following at Muhammad's heels, would not reach him here.

Here amid the boundless sea expanses he would be able to bitterly recall the past, calmly assess the present, and unhurriedly plan for the future. The Khorezm Shah had

a supply of food to last him a month: the Astrabad ruler had set up a felt yurt in a hollow between sand-hills, brought a cauldron, a sack of rice, lamb's fat, a leather pail, an axe and other essential items. Now the shah would become a dervish; he would prepare his daily meals himself.

The boat was far away now, but Muhammad continued to stand there, lost in thought, then lay down on the hot dry sand and dozed, warmed by the sun and fanned by a gentle sea breeze.

Rustling and whispers awakened the shah. He heard the words, "He is big, he is strong..."

Whose voices could he be hearing on this deserted island? Enemies again? The shah looked around. On a knoll, amid tufts of grey grass, he caught a glimpse of a head in a black sheepskin hat that immediately vanished again. Muhammad had no weapons with him — the bow, arrows and axe were in the yurt. The shah climbed quickly up the knoll. Several men in rags, barefoot, were running across a clay clearing, and among them some terrible creature hobbled along on four stumps.

"I ordered the Astrabad ruler to deliver me to a completely deserted island! Where did these people come from?!" Alarmed, Muhammad set out for his yurt. Smoke curled up over it. On the clearing before the yurt about a dozen monstrous creatures sat in a semicircle. What kind of faces were these, almost entirely void of human traits? Swollen, red lion-like mugs with huge ulcers and sores.

"Who are you?" cried one of those seated. "Why have you come here? Everywhere we go we are driven away, so we have occupied this island."

"And who are you?"

"We are men cursed by Allah. We came to this island today and we are going to fish here."

"Don't you see? We are all lepers; still alive, we are falling apart like dead men. Look, all his fingers have fallen off. That one has lost his feet and his arms up to the elbows, and he hobbles about on all fours like a bear. This one's eye has fallen out, and that one's tongue has decayed and now he is dumb..."

Muhammad said nothing, thinking with longing about the boat that was now but a black speck moving toward the distant shore.

"We all prayed that Allah would help us. He took pity on us and sent you."

"How can I help you?"

One of the lepers rose. He appeared to be stronger and taller than the others and he held the axe in his hand.

"I am the sheik of our fraternity, and here in the kingdom of the damned everyone must obey me. He who does not carry out my orders will be killed. You are big and strong. We accept you into our community, and you shall haul the nets and bring the water and firewood. Not all of us are capable of doing that. In this yurt, sent to us by Allah, we found a cauldron, rice, flour, a jug of oil and lamb's fat. Now you shall live with us. Take off your clothes — we will take turns wearing them. You need no clothes yourself."

Muhammad turned around and, huffing and puffing, ran back to the shore. The lepers followed him and watched from the top of the knoll. The Khorezm Shah walked out to the sand bar, gathered some dry twigs washed up by the sea, piled them up and started a fire. A pillar of dense smoke billowed up toward the sky.

"They will see this smoke from the shore, the boat will come and take me back to land," Muhammad muttered, thinking only of the boat that was fading in the foggy distance. "Even if there is war, even if the Tatar horsemen are scouring about, still, there are living, healthy people there. They fight each other, they suffer, cry and laugh, and it will be a joy to live among them after this island of the living dead."

Fifteen days later, as promised, a boat arrived at the island. On it was the Khorezm Shah's commander Timur-Melik and a few jigits. It took some time before they were able to find the Khorezm Shah. He was lying on the beach utterly naked. A crow sat on his head pecking at his eyes.

Timur-Melik walked around the island and found the frightened lepers hiding in the bushes. He asked them what had taken place on the island. They told him the following:

"We saw that everyone who arrived on the boat bowed down to the ground before the man who remained on the

island with us, and they called him padishah. We know well from the old men that if a leper dons the garb worn by a shah or sultan the sick man will get well, his wounds will be healed. It was for that reason alone that we took the clothes off this man. We invited him to sup with us, brought him food, but he refused to eat; he just kept burning his fire, lying there in silence like he is now. His clothes are all intact. We are certain that this man was not a sultan, because none of us got well."

"Permit us, we shall kill them all!" one jigit exclaimed.

"Only not with our sabres, so as not to soil our shiny blades with their poisoned blood," replied a second warrior and shot an arrow through the stomach of the lepers' sheik. The latter took to his heels with a desperate howl and all the other lepers fled after him.

"Leave them alone!" cried Timur-Melik. "Allah has already punished them. I am far more miserable than they. I fought all my life for the grandeur of the Khorezm shahs. I spilled my blood, believing that the Khorezm Shah Muhammad was a second invincible Iskender and that come a day of national grief he would lead the fearless Muslim troops to glorious victories. Now I am ashamed of my wounds, I begrudge my youthful years, wasted in defense of a false mirage in the desert. Here lies he who had an enormous army and could have conquered the universe, but now he is powerless to even raise his hand and shoo away this crow. He lies forgotten by all, without any clothes to cover his nakedness, or a handful of his native earth for his grave. I have had enough of being a warrior! I have not the tears to wash away the bitter mistakes that smite me..."

Timur-Melik whipped out his curved sabre, stepped on it and broke it in two. He wrapped the body of the Khorezm Shah in the cloth of his turban and read the only short prayer he knew over him. The jigits dug a pit in the sand with their knives and buried in it the corpse of the Khorezm Shah Muhammad, once the mightiest of all Muslim sovereigns, who had ended his life ingloriously, like a kid goat trembling beneath the butcher's knife.

Timur-Melik left the island and set out with his jigits in search of Sultan Jelal ed-Din in order to tell him of his

father's death. They say he then wandered about as a simple dervish for many years, roaming the lands of Arabia, Persia and India.¹

Chapter Five

KURBAN-KYZYK GOES HOME

"Row harder! Come on now, a little farther!"

The boat, its bow pointed upstream, fought the swift current of the Jaihun and moved slowly toward the bank.

"Look after the shah's horse in a foreign land — some job! Better to go hungry in my own!" Kurban mused. "It's about as much pleasure as a song-bird gets out sitting in a silk cage over the door of an inn. The padishah gave me a gold dinar. A day like this comes once in a lifetime. But how will I get the dinar home? Only by carrying it in my cheek. He ordered the boats sent down the river to Khorezm... No! I will not go there. No, Kurban does not wish to keep fighting for the shah, nor to flee. This way one might run as far as the Last Sea, and then where? Kurban wants to return to his plot of land and see his children..."

And Kurban glanced back at the cliff-lined bank they had left behind, where Muhammad could still be seen astride his bay horse at the top of a knoll. Kurban jumped into the water and made his way to shore. Frantic people with bundles on their shoulders were running down the hill from the fortress; pushing each other aside, they leaped onto the boats and kept repeating:

"The Tatars are coming! Run for your lives!"

Kurban was the last of anyone's worries. He ran along the bank, reached the shelter of branches where he lived with the other boatmen, found the sack with his boots under the straw, took a last look at the river and saw that one by one the boats were pushing off from shore. At once, without hesitation, he set out on a path of new tribulations.

¹Some historians say that Timur-Melik returned to Central Asia many years later dressed as a poor dervish. In Khojent he was recognized by the Mongol whose eye he had pierced with an arrow. The Mongol district ruler ordered Timur-Melik brought before him and had him executed for his proud, inexorable manner of speaking.

He climbed the hill to the fortress walls. From there he saw men in red and striped robes running across the rocky yellow plain, fleeing in all directions, while even farther away he detected an approaching cloud of dust.

"Those are the Tatars," Kurban realized and bolted across the dry steppe, oblivious to the rocks and thorns tearing at his bare feet.

"There up ahead is a hill, and beyond it there should be ravines. The Tatars will be busy with the fortress and crossing the river. What need have they of Kurban?"

He ran up to a lone grave with a large pole, hid behind it, caught his breath and began peering out.

Amid the screen of dust he was now able to make out men in red sheepskins hugging the necks of their charging steeds. Metal sheets of armor flashed on some of them. He could already hear Tatars' savage cries of "khu-khu-khu" and the trampling of the thousands of hooves of their short, dusty horses.

Some of the men broke off from the horde, galloped across the plain to where people were fleeing and cut off their path of retreat. Swords flashed, people fell, the Tatars circled around, stopped, and without dismounting, bent over and picked up the scattered bundles and raced off again, rejoining the troop.

Kurban crawled to a dry ravine, tumbled down and took to his heels once again.

The desert plain stretched on and on all day long. Now and then Kurban came upon abandoned ploughlands; along the roads he encountered people, alone or wandering in bands. When they learned that Kurban had come from *there*, from "the valley of agony and tears", everyone stopped and asked about the fate of Bukhara, about the flight of the Khorezm Shah, invited him to join their campfires, shared with him their flat bread baked in cinders, and listened eagerly.

Kurban told them how he had fought several Tatars at once, how he had slain them all and how his horse had been killed beneath him. Now he was trudging home, wishing nothing more than to see the old poplar at the spot where the irrigation ditch turned toward his land, to cuddle his children again.

In the end he began believing his stories himself,

though he failed to mention the fact that he had carried Muhammad ashore from the boat, for everyone now cursed the shah who had abandoned his native land in its hour of grief. Having left his people in the hands of the Mongols and Tatars, he was afraid to die like a martyr on the field of battle.

In one place Kurban saw many people in a ravine and went up to them. They made room for him by the fire. Everyone was speaking about the Tatars and their encounters with them.

"We are from one village. Here is what happened to us. A dozen or so of us had gathered in the street to chat. Suddenly a Tatar horseman rode into the village. He charged straight at us and started cutting people down one after another. Not a man among us dared raise his hand against the lone horseman. Whoever managed to climb over the fence, like us, survived."

"This is what I heard. A Tatar overtook a man working in the fields, but the Tatar had no weapon with which to kill him. He cried in a terrible voice, 'Lay your head on the ground and don't move!' And what do you think?! The man lay down on the ground while the Tatar galloped over to his second horse all loaded down with plundered goods, found his sword and went back and killed the man."

So they sat by the fire and lamented over how their native people suffered, and gave Kurban pieces of bread and a cup of hot millet mash.

Suddenly a terrible hoarse voice cried out above them, "Hey, you! Tie your hands behind your backs!"

Up above, on the edge of the ravine, a Tatar warrior appeared on a reddish horse.

"Woe is us! The hour of our doom has arrived!" the people muttered and set about removing their sashes and obediently tying up each other's hands.

"Wait!" said Kurban. "He is alone. Do you really think we cannot kill him and run away?"

"We are afraid!"

"When we tie up our own hands he will kill us. Let us kill him instead! Maybe we can escape."

"Oh, no! Who would dare do that!"

Trembling, they all continued binding each other's hands.

Kurban, bowing and holding his bundle out before him as if he wished to pay tribute, scampered up the slope and approached the Tatar.

The horseman was quite old. Tufts of thin grey hair hung from his chin. His weather-beaten face was furrowed by the wrinkles of time. His narrowed eyes peered out like sharp-edged splinters.

"What is this?" asked the Tatar, bending over the bundle.

Kurban grabbed him by the head and arm. The horse panicked and bolted. Kurban held fast to the Tatar, letting the horse drag him along the ground until the Tatar fell over. Then Kurban slit his throat with a knife, just as he was used to slaughtering sheep.

Kurban rose and looked around. Of the men by the fire one had taken to his heels, while the others, hiding, peered out from the ravine. Then two of them came up to Kurban.

"He has stopped breathing," said one, bending over the Tatar.

"Now we must divide fairly everything on him," said the other and began tugging at the dead man's sheepskin coat, which the latter wore without a shirt on his dark bare body.

Everyone started for the horse and helped Kurban catch it. Then Kurban said, "You take everything you like, but the red steed is mine. You see it is not a Mongol horse but one of our peasant work horses. I bet it was stolen. I shall plough the land with it."

"Let's cast lots instead," said one, winding the horse's reins around his hand.

"Look, the Tatar is alive, he's getting up!" cried Kurban, and the terrified man dropped the reins and fled.

Kurban untied and discarded all the bags and sacks on the horse, except for the heaviest one. Getting into the saddle he shouted, "You're no jigits, you're frightened beetles fleeing from a raised stick. If you had lions' hearts, together we would drive out not only all the Tatars and Mongols, but all the Khorezm shahs, sultans, beks and khans who seized our land. But you, cockroaches, hide in cracks, afraid of every sound! Naturally, even a Tatar weakling could crush you. Farewell, and remember Kurban-Kyzyk, mighty warrior of the uni-

verse!" and with a wave of his hand Kurban galloped off across the field.

Chapter Six

KURBAN SEARCHES FOR HIS FAMILY

The closer Kurban got to Bukhara, the more frequent were the ruined villages and gnawed corpses he encountered along his way. Gorged dogs with sagging bellies walked slowly away from the bodies, wagging their tails, and lay down without a bark.

In a deserted place Kurban opened the one leather sack left on the saddle, hoping the Tatar had kept his stolen gold in it. But he found inside three ordinary smith's hammers of various sizes, a file, pincers, a small bag of grain, a piece of boiled meat and a dozen loaves of flat bread. Where was the gold? Kurban found a leather purse wrapped in a rag. It contained money — not gold, but a handful of silver and copper coins. But even these dirhams would come in handy, and then, he still had the Khorezm Shah's gold dinar in his cheek.

Near some of the villages people were already working in the fields. They complained to Kurban that the water in the irrigation ditches flowed irregularly and incorrectly, that some of the fields had dried up while others had been flooded, the ploughed and sown areas washed away. New ravines had formed everywhere.

When he was already quite close to home, Kurban met a peasant friend Kuvonch in a deserted village. Kuvonch pointed to a pile of charred stones and cinders.

"That is all that is left of my house!" said Kuvonch, shaking his head sadly. "I walk around and call my children's names, but they do not come. The day the Mongols came I was in the fields. I saw the smoke and my crazed neighbors and I ran after them, figuring that my family, too, had fled along with others. When I came back in the night to look for my house, nothing was left of it but these stones and hot ash. I do not know if the Mongols took my children away or if they all perished in the flames... But perhaps they will return yet..."

Full of alarm, Kurban moved on, and only after dark

found himself beneath the old poplar in the spot where the irrigation ditch turned toward his plot.

Water flowed in the ditch. In that noiseless night, by the faint glow of the moon Kurban approached his house. The gates to the yard were wide open. He dismounted, led his horse under the awning and started toward the door of his house. It was boarded up. Not a sound, not a sigh came from inside...

Even the dog did not come out to greet him...

Kurban gathered up a bale of straw and tossed it down in front of the horse. Then he clambered up to the roof along familiar protrusions in the wall. There he lay down on a pile of old jugara stems. As he drifted off to sleep Kuvonch's words came back to him, "Perhaps they will return yet..."

Early in the morning, when Kurban was tossing and turning on the roof of his hut, chilled by a cold wind, a strange sound, like a distant moan, reached his ears. Kurban stopped to listen. The moan came again. It was coming from below. Who could be moaning? Someone wounded by the Tatars? Or perhaps a dying Tatar?

Kurban got down from the roof and ran to the horse. It had eaten all the straw and was stamping its hooves impatiently. Kurban took one of the hammers from the sack. Breaking the door open, he went inside. It was dark. He slid his hands along the cot and came upon a body. He felt the face and recognized it as his mother's. She was lying as if dead. But a thin voice moaned, "I knew you would come back, my son. Kurban would not abandon us..."

"But where are the others?"

"They all ran to the mountains, but I stayed here to guard the house and now I've lost all my strength. The neighbors probably mistook me for dead and boarded up the door. Oh, my son, now that you have come everything will be all right..."

Kurban found a pot, brought water from the irrigation ditch and gathered up some brambles. He made a fire in the fireplace and put on the pot, filling it with millet. It grew light and warm inside the hut. His mother lay thin and weak, unable to move. Her nose had grown sharp, and her dry, gaunt lips kept whispering, "You've come back, my son!"

Kurban led the horse to an open lot, hobbled it and left it to graze. Beside it was his plot of land, a scrap no bigger than the palm of his hand — how could he feed his family off it? And on top of that he had to give half his crop to the landowner — the bek! The plot was already overgrown with weeds. Beyond it stretched the familiar plots of his neighbors. They too were covered with weeds, and there was not a soul in sight. The house and shed of the old stuttering smith, Sakou-Kuli, stood in the distance, scorched, with smoke-stained walls, while on the trees surrounding the house, the leaves had wilted and curled from the fire.

A lone man was striding slowly across the field, stopping, swinging his hoe, probably repairing the ditch.

“Aye-yea!” cried Kurban.

The man straightened and looked up, shading his eyes with his hand.

“Aye-yea! Kurban-Kyzyk!” he cried, and both started quickly along the irrigation ditch toward one another, arms extended, and embraced, their right shoulders pressing together. It was Kurban’s neighbor Sakou-Kuli, already a grandfather.

“Oh, what times these are!” the old man said, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

“Is your family well and your cow alive, does your donkey work, are your sheep producing?” Kurban asked.

“Those men wrapped in sheepskins came, drove away the neighbor’s livestock, tied my four sheep across their saddles and took them away along with one of my granddaughters, the rest of the family fled to the mountains. I keep waiting for them — if only they have not died of hunger. My cow and my donkey were saved.”

“But where is my family?” asked Kurban. He awaited the answer with bated breath.

“I have good news for you — your wife came back yesterday and spent the night in the ruins of my poor home. There she is coming across the field...”

Kurban saw in the distance his wife’s familiar red clothes. Why did she sway as she walked? Kurban at once assumed a serious and important air — for he was the head of the family and he must gather them all under his authority and revive their ruined household.

“Well, Sakou-Kuli,” he said to the old man. “You have

a cow and a donkey, I have a horse. We shall harness them together and plough our scraps of land. War and raids are all around; yesterday there were the Kipchak beks, today the Mongol khans. When will we ever be rid of them? But we, tillers of the land, cannot wait. Our business is to sow the grain; if we do not take care of ourselves, who is going to feed us?"

"True! We must not lose time: the soil calls for seeds, water and the plough!"

Chapter Seven

THE FLIGHT OF QUEEN TURKAN-KHATUN

By the spring of that awful year, the Year of the Dragon all of Maverun-Nahr was under Jenghiz Khan's control. Like a diligent master who has received a valuable inheritance, the Mongol kagan began taking measures to restore peace and order in his lands. Jenghiz Khan posted Tatar garrisons in all the towns, appointed khakims from among the native population and assigned Mongol rulers to them, so that all would see, all would be aware of the watchful eye of the great kagan.

Some of the peasants, still frightened and mistrustful, gradually began returning to their villages and took to working the fields. But order was slow in being restored: bands of hungry, homeless refugees roamed the entire country, and in the Mongols' wake, they too plundered the ravaged villages in search of food.

Only the lower reaches of the Jaihun, the native lands of Khorezm and Gurganj, the splendid capital of the Khorezm shahs, remained unconquered. Like a tent with all its tethers severed, it stood as an island amid Mongol possessions. Jenghiz Khan determined to lay his hands on these lands and assigned his three sons Juchi, Jagatai and Ugedei the task of conquering this region, sending with them a significant part of his troops. Jagatai and Ugedei moved on Khorezm from the south, along the bank of the river Jaihun, but the ever disobedient Juchi began to tarry, remaining with his men near Jend, where he hunted down wild donkeys and confiscated the nomads' horses, demanding only the white and sorrel ones, the kagan's favorites.

Jenghiz Khan halted his main army and decided to spend the winter on the banks of the river Jaihun. He dispatched Danishmend-Hajib, one of the Khorezm Shah's officials who had come over to his side, to Gurganj. The emissary arrived to see Queen Turkan-Khatun and announced to her that the great kagan was fighting not with her but only with her son Muhammad, the Shah of Khorezm, and not so much for the crimes he had committed as for his disobedience and for the insults inflicted by him on his mother. Danishmend-Hajib added that if Turkan-Khatun submitted, Jenghiz Khan promised not to invade or ravage the regions under her control.

But the insidious Queen Turkan-Khatun was not about to trust the Mongol sovereign who was honest with his Mongols alone, treating all others as does a hunter who plays the pipe to entice the goat, that he might seize it for shish-kebab.

Danishmend-Hajib's arrival in Gurganj coincided with that of the boats from Kelif. One of them delivered Inanch Khan, disguised as a simple farm-hand, who bore a letter from the Khorezm Shah. The padishah informed his mother that he was quitting the outposts on the bank of the Jaihun. He was leaving for Khorasan in order to gather a large army there, and encouraged Turkan-Khatun to join him there with his whole harem, and not to trust Jenghiz Khan.

Turkan-Khatun was so greatly alarmed by these tidings that she forgot to dab her eyes with the lotions she used to make them more beautiful. Realizing the danger of staying in Khorezm, she ordered a large caravan packed up, gathered all the Khorezm Shah's wives and children, loaded the camels with valuables and started out across the Kara-Kum Desert to the south, toward the Kapet-Dagh mountains.

Before setting out, the old queen decided to eliminate all her grandsons' possible future rivals. She ordered the head executioner to take all the young hostages residing in the shah's court, regardless of age, out in a boat to where the Jaihun was very deep and throw them into the water with large stones tied to their feet. All twenty-seven young men and boys, sons of the major feudal rulers of Khorezm, were drowned.

Of all the hostages Turkan-Khatun spared the life of

but one — Omar Khan, son of the ruler of Yazer¹ in Turkmen country. She did this only because she was setting out in that direction herself, and Omar Khan and his servants knew how to cross the desert. During the difficult journey across the sands of the Kara-Kum, lasting sixteen days, they served the old queen faithfully and tirelessly.

But as soon as the caravan approached the far borders of Yazer and the rocky peaks of the mountains appeared beyond the sand-hills, Turkan-Khatun ordered Omar Khan beheaded in his sleep.

She steered the caravan to the invulnerable fortress Ilal, situated at the top of a lone cliff. Here she remained with her whole court until the vanguard Mongol detachments appeared nearby, searching for Shah Muhammad.

The head of the queen's guard suggested that she flee at once to the protection of her grandson Jelal ed-Din, who had gathered many soldiers in Persia to battle with the Mongols. Everyone spoke only of his courage, the strength of his army, about how he would succeed in routing the enemy.

"Never!" the old woman cried in a rage. "I would rather perish by the sword of a Mongol! To think that I would sink so low as to accept charity from the son of that hateful Turkmen Ai-Jijek! That I would live under his protection when I have grandsons of my own noble Kipchak blood! I would rather be taken prisoner by Jenghiz Khan and suffer humility and shame from him."

The Mongols soon arrived and besieged the fortress. They formed a solid blockade around the cliff, cutting the besieged off from the rest of the world. The siege lasted four months, and when the last of the water reserves in the cisterns and cellars had run dry, Turkan-Khatun decided to surrender. In addition to the shah's mother, the Mongols captured the entire harem and the Khorezm Shah's young sons. All the boys were slaughtered on the spot, while the shah's wives and daughters, along with Turkan-Khatun herself, were sent to Jenghiz Khan's camp. The Mongols also slew the entire retinue and the guard.

¹Yazer was located on the foothills between Merv and present-day Ashkhabad.

The Mongol sovereign wasted no time in distributing the Khorezm Shah's daughters among his sons and retainers, while he kept the vicious Queen Turkan-Khatun for show at his feasts. She was made to sit near the entrance to the tent and sing plaintive songs while Jenghiz Khan tossed her gnawed bones.

That is how she got her meals, Turkan-Khatun, once the autocratic sovereign of Khorezm, who had humbly referred to herself as the "ruler of all the women in the universe".

Part Two

THE FINAL DAYS OF THE GREAT KHOREZM

Chapter One

JELAL ED-DIN CHALLENGES JENGHIZ KHAN TO A BATTLE

Until you have sown the grain, you cannot reap the harvest; until you have risked your life, you cannot conquer the enemy.

Saadi

Having bid farewell to the Khorezm Shah, Jelal ed-Din and his half-brothers, Ozlag Shah and Ak Shah, accompanied by seventy horsemen, made their way to Manghish-lak. Here the local nomads provided them with fresh horses, on which the young khans crossed the Kara-Kum and reached Gurganj, the capital of Khorezm.

In Gurganj they announced to the distinguished beks that the Khorezm Shah Muhammad had changed his will and appointed Sultan Jelal ed-Din his successor. And although the former heir Ozlag Shah confirmed this, the Kipchak beks did not wish to recognize a sultan who was not of Kipchak blood. Meeting in secret, they conspired to kill Jelal ed-Din.

Upon his arrival from Kelif, Inanch Khan warned him of the plot.

“What is there for me to do in a city of scorpions and tarantulas, where there is no unity even in the face of danger!” said Jelal ed-Din.

That night, accompanied by Timur-Melik and three hundred Turkmens, he left Gurganj unnoticed and headed south across the Kara-Kum.

In but a few days the small detachment made the hard journey which took caravans seventeen days, and reached the city of Nessa. The scout sent ahead reported having seen some yurts on a green meadow at the foot of the Kapet-Dagh mountains, and nearby some hobbled horses of a strange breed grazed. These appeared to be Mongols, and there was no less than seven hundred of them.

Timur-Melik said, “Although our steeds are weary after the long journey, they have strength enough to charge into the Mongol camp. And we should have skill enough to slaughter the enemy.”

“Success belongs to the courageous!” replied Jelal ed-Din.

Bursting suddenly out of the desert, Jelal ed-Din’s detachment of Turkmens charged into the Mongol camp with desperate fury. The battle was a fierce one, both sides spilling much blood and neither hesitating to lay down their lives. The Mongols could not hold out and fled in disarray, hiding in the underground water-works. Only a few managed to escape.

This was the first encounter in which the Turkmens had gained victory over the Mongols. Before, the Mongols had inspired such universal horror that they were thought to be invincible.

Jelal ed-Din said, “If the Mongols had not set up camp on the open plain but behind the fortress walls of Nessa, we would never have been able to slip by on our weary steeds. Catch and saddle their horses — quickly! We still have a long journey ahead of us.

The warriors quickly mounted the Mongols’ fresh horses and headed south along mountain trails to the city of Nishapur.

A few days later, fearing treason on the part of the Kipchak khans, the Khorezm Shah’s other two sons, Ozlag Shah and Ak Shah, arrived in Nessa from Gurganj. Accompanied by a large retinue, they tried to slip by the Mongol sentries unnoticed, but they were surrounded and all of them killed.

In the meantime, Jelal ed-Din, making no stops, headed on through Nishapur, Zuzan and the Herat region. The chief of one mountain fortress proposed that Jelal ed-Din stay there, relying on the invulnerability of the ancient walls. But Jelal ed-Din replied, "A commander must fight in the open field and not close himself up behind walls. No matter how strong the fortress, the Mongols will find a way to take it."

When he arrived in Bust, Jelal ed-Din had a significant troop, made up of warriors from the Khorezm Shah's scattered detachments. Here he joined the troop of Amin-al-Mulk, drove away the Mongols besieging Kandahar, and reached Ghazni, the principal city of the area, once assigned to him by the Khorezm Shah. He took oaths of allegiance from all the local beks.

Jelal ed-Din now had nearly thirty thousand Turkmen warriors. And he was joined by that many more Afghans, Karluks and warriors from other tribes.

With this army of sixty thousand infantry and cavalry men Jelal ed-Din started out to meet the Mongols and set up camp by the town of Parwan, at the mouth of the Logar River, which flowed into the Kabul.

From there he made an attack on Toharistan and routed the Mongol detachment of Mukajek, who had besieged the fortress at Varian. The Mongols lost up to a thousand men, hastily crossed the river Panjshir, destroying the bridges behind them, and rejoined Jenghiz Khan.

Jelal ed-Din sent a messenger to Jenghiz Khan with a short note:

"Name the site where we shall meet in battle. I shall await you there."

Jenghiz Khan made no reply, but he was alarmed by Mukajek's defeat and Jelal ed-Din's courage. He sent against him forty thousand warriors under the command of his half-brother Shiki-Hutuhu Noyon.

Jelal ed-Din advanced bravely to meet the Mongols. The battle took place in a valley some seven kilometers from Parwan. Before encountering the enemy Jelal ed-Din gave his army the following command:

"Warriors, save your horses' strength until you hear the drums. Only then should you mount your horses. Fight on foot until then, tying the horses' reins to your sashes behind you."

The battle lasted for two days. Shiki-Hutuhu Noyon, upon seeing that his Mongol troops were fatigued and running out of strength, still unable to overcome the enemy, resorted to trickery on the second day. He ordered some dummies to be made from felt and tied to the saddles of reserve horses. At first the trick worked, and the Muslim troops hesitated, but Jelal ed-Din reassured his warriors and they went on fighting stubbornly.

At last Jelal ed-Din ordered the drums sounded. The warriors mounted their steeds and he led them in the attack. He lunged into the heart of the Mongol army and split it in two. Then the Mongols took to flight, "making sparks fly from their horses' hooves": Jelal ed-Din's men on their unspont horses easily overtook and killed the fleeing enemy. It was with but insignificant remnants of his routed troop that Shiki-Hutuhu returned to Jenghiz Khan's camp.

News of the battle at Parwan and the routing of the invincible Mongols spread like wildfire across mountains and valleys. The Mongol detachment besieging the fortress at Balkh quickly withdrew and fled to the north. In several towns occupied by the Mongols, the natives revolted and killed the enemy garrisons. Then Jenghiz Khan resorted to his usual trickery: he sent spies to the khans who were allies of Jelal ed-Din and promised them camels loaded down with gold if they would leave the brave sultan.

Discord soon arose in Jelal ed-Din's camp over trifling matters during the division of the loot. In an argument over an Arabian horse one Kipchak khan struck Agrak, the leader of a large detachment, over the head with a whip, and Jelal ed-Din was unable to reconcile the two. After that, Muzafar-Malik, the leader of the Afghans, and Azam-Melik with his Karluks, and Agrak with his warriors from Kelj, falling for Jenghiz Khan's trick, split off from Jelal ed-Din's army, complaining of the haughtiness and roughness of the Kipchaks, who dared to strike the warriors of other tribes with their whips.

"Those Turks (i.e., Kipchaks) once feared the Mongols. They swore the Mongols were unlike ordinary people, that they were invincible because blows from the sword could not wound them. That is why, they claimed, the Mongols feared no one on earth, since there was no other

force that could fight them. But now that we have crushed the Mongols and everyone has seen that the Mongol tribe, like all men, can be wounded and bleed the very same blood as everyone else, the Kipchaks are full of vainglory and have taken to insulting us, who aided them in battle..."

Jelal ed-Din could do nothing. Try as he might to convince them that Jenghiz Khan would crush his opponents with ease by attacking each one separately, his protestations were all in vain: half the army left him. He remained with only the Turkmens of Amin-al-Mulk.

When Shiki-Hutuhu Noyon returned to Jenghiz Khan and told him the details of the battle at Parwan, Jenghiz Khan remained, as always, undaunted and impenetrable. He said only, "Hutuhu is accustomed to always being the victor and the dominator. Now, having tasted the bitterness of defeat, he will become more careful and experienced in military affairs."

Nonetheless, Jenghiz Khan did not waste time, but called together all the troops he could and set out with an enormous force. He drove his horsemen with such haste that there was no time to cook food along the way. The kagan moved straight for Ghazni, and when the road ended he abandoned his entire wagon train and advanced across the mountains along horse trails.

Chapter Two

THE BATTLE AT THE SINDH¹

I shall not call you horse, I shall call you brother.
You are more than a brother to me.

Kitabi-Korkud

After the allied troops had gone Jelal ed-Din could no longer fight open battles with the Mongols as he had intended, and set out for the south. He was stopped by the swift and high waters of the river Sindh, compressed by

¹*Sindh* — the river Indus, which flows from Tibet and empties into the Persian Gulf.

mountains. The sultan looked for boats and rafts in order to send his army across, but the swift waves dashed all the vessels against the rocky shores. Another vessel was brought and Jelal ed-Din attempted to send his mother Ai-Jijek, his wife and other women in their company across on it. But it too was shattered on the rocks, and the women remained on the bank along with the army.

All at once a messenger came galloping up with cries of, "The Mongols are very near!" At that moment night was shrouding everything in its black blanket.

Having learned that Sultan Jelal ed-Din was seeking a way to cross the Sindh, Jenghiz Khan decided to seize him. He led his army through the night, and at dawn he caught sight of the enemy. The Mongols began approaching the sultan's troops from three sides. They formed several semicircles the shape of a tensed bow, with the river Sindh as its string.

Jenghiz Khan sent Uner-Gulija and Gugus-Gulija with their detachments to drive the sultan away from the bank, while he gave his army the order, "Do not pierce the sultan with your arrows. We order him taken alive."

Jelal ed-Din was now in the midst of the Muslim army, surrounded by his seven hundred brave horsemen. Catching sight of Jenghiz Khan on a hill, from which he directed the battle, the sultan with his jigits plunged into attack with such fury that he drove off the Mongols, and the Mongol ruler himself was forced to flee, driving his horse with his whip.

But the far-sighted and cautious Jenghiz Khan had hidden ten thousand prize warriors in ambush before the battle. They came charging out at the flank, attacked Jelal ed-Din, pushed him back and rushed at the Turkmen's right wing, commanded by Amin-al-Mulk. The Mongols broke his ranks and pressed them into the center of the troop, where they fell into disarray and began to retreat.

Then the Mongols crushed the left wing. Jelal ed-Din went on fighting with his jigits until noon, and, having lost his usual calm, lunged at one wing and then the other like a hunted tiger.

The Mongols did not forget the kagan's order not to shoot at the sultan, and the ring around Jelal ed-Din grew ever tighter. He fought desperately, trying to hack his

way through the enemy ranks. Seeing the hopelessness of his situation, the sultan left his horse and mounted his favorite Turkmen steed; he discarded his helmet and armor, keeping only his sword. Then he turned his steed around and leaped from the high cliff into the dark waters of the surging Sindh. Having swum across the river and made his way up the steep bank, Jelal ed-Din brandished his sword at Jenghiz Khan and galloped away, vanishing in the brush.

Jenghiz Khan put his hand to his mouth in awe, pointed at Jelal ed-Din and said to his sons, "That is the kind of son a father should have!"¹

When they saw the sultan plunge into the river, the Mongols wanted to pursue him, but Jenghiz Khan forbade it.

They slaughtered all of Jelal ed-Din's men, but not before the warriors had had a chance to throw his wife and mother into the river, so they would not fall into the Mongols' hands.

The sole survivor was Jelal ed-Din's seven-year-old son, captured by the Mongols. They brought him before Jenghiz Khan. The boy, turning sideways to the kagan, looked askance at him with a bold and hateful eye.

"The clan of our enemies must be severed at its roots," said Jenghiz Khan. "The descendents of such brave Muslims will slaughter my grandsons. Therefore you shall feed the heart of this boy to my wolfhound."

The Mongol executioner, with a proud smile at being allowed to demonstrate his art before the great kagan, rolled up his sleeves and approached the boy. He threw him to his back, and in an instant, as was the Mongol custom, had torn open his chest with a knife, thrust his hand up under the ribs and yanked out the small steaming heart, which he presented to Jenghiz Khan.

The latter grunted several times like an old hog, "Khu-khu-khu!" turned his sorrel, and, hunching over sullenly, continued up the rocky path.

After the battle at the Sindh, Sultan Jelal ed-Din, wandering about different countries, continued to fight

¹From Rashid al-Din's historical chronicles.

the Mongols successfully, gathering troops of courageous men. But he never put together an army large enough to defeat the Mongols.

Chapter Three

HAJI RAKHIM IS MADE A SCRIBE

From the night in Bukhara when Mahmud-Yalvach saved Haji Rakhim from the swords of the Mongol sentry and gave him permission to cling to the hem of his generosity, the dervish followed him everywhere, and at the dervish's heels, like a shadow, was his younger brother Tugan.

Mahmud-Yalvach was made the head advisor to the new ruler of the Maverai-un-Nahr region, Jenghiz Khan's son Jagatai Khan. Jagatai himself was more interested in hunting and feasting, so Mahmud-Yalvach collected taxes for him, assessed the valuables seized by the Tatars, dispatched slave caravans to Mongolia, took an inventory of the houses and estates abandoned by the beks, promulgated new taxes and sent out special tax-collectors to exact them.

He appealed to the villagers to return to their lands and sow grain and cotton, promising that the former beks would not return to their estates, so they would not be required to pay them quitrent for the land.

But he said all this to calm the people, to persuade the frightened villagers to return to their fields, and to put an end to the attacks of hungry homeless bands on caravans. It was later discovered that all these promises were but a ploy, and in the place of Turkmen, Tajik and Kipchak beks, the Mongol khans gradually took possession of the land, so the villagers who had returned once again found themselves working under them and relinquishing almost the whole of their crops.

Mahmud-Yalvach made Haji Rakhim the scribe of his chancellery. The dervish, temporarily putting aside composition of mellifluous gazels¹, served diligently, sitting every day from morning till dark on a large worn rug in

¹*Gazel* — a particular form of Arabic poetry.

a row with other scribes, writing accounts, inventories of possessions, orders and various other important papers.

Mahmud-Yalvach paid the dervish no allowance and said to him once, "What do you need an allowance for? Gold dust clings to the hands of him who moves around wealth..."

"But not to the hands of a dervish poet," replied Haji Rakhim. "Only the dust of many years' wandering has collected on my old cloak."

Then Mahmud-Yalvach gave him a bright new robe and ordered him to appear before him on Thursday mornings, the eve of the holy day Friday, to collect three silver dirhams for bread, tea and the bath, so that the dust gathered by the dervish on the endless roads of the universe would not soil the official papers.

Another in Haji Rakhim's place would have considered himself fortunate: he lived in a small house abandoned by its owners and could make use of it as his own. When he returned from the chancellery he would sit on the steps of the porch before the vineyard, so bountifully hung with amber grapes that the crop would last an entire year. Near the house grew a plane tree so tall that it cast a shadow on the neighboring mosque as well, protecting the dervish's little house from the scorching sun. An irrigation ditch brought water to the grapevines, and in the cool of evening Haji Rakhim would teach his younger brother Tugan algebra and Arabic script.

Haji Rakhim, however, was a seeker not of fortune but of the extraordinary, and the hot coals of discontent smouldered in his heart. He was soon unable to reconcile himself to the work he carried out. Hundreds of supplicants came to the chancellery daily, often with complaints about the Mongols' repressions of the civilian population; the entire country was in the hands of the new conquerors, who treated the people as would wolves in a sheep pen.

At that point Haji Rakhim said to himself, "Enough, dervish! He who serves the enemy of his own people deserves damnation instead of praise." And he set out to see Mahmud-Yalvach, having resolved to tell him truthfully everything that was burning at his heart.

He found Mahmud in the great palace garden, where he was clipping dry twigs in the vineyard, thus finding

respite from his cares. Mahmud heard the dervish out and said, "You want to abandon your own mother when she is covered with wounds and spent with suffering?"

"I do not want to serve the enslavers of my people..."

"No doubt you consider me too a wicked man for serving the enslavers of my native people? This is my reply: Our ruler, the great kagan Jenghiz Khan, has a head advisor, the Chinaman Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai. He always tells Jenghiz Khan the truth without fear. He alone stops him from the senseless extermination of entire towns, explaining, 'If you kill all the people, who will pay taxes to you and your grandsons?' And upon hearing these words Jenghiz Khan shows mercy on hundreds of thousands of prisoners... I try to do the same by staying near Jenghiz Khan's son Jagatai Khan in order to save our Muslim people from total annihilation. Have you seen Jagatai's face? A mad rage fills his eyes! Every day during the reception he points his finger at someone and says the horrible words, '*Alyb-baryn!*'¹ and the poor wretch is taken away to be executed. While every day I try to wrest grace and mercy from him."

"I will stay in my native land," Haji Rakhim replied. "But give me some other work: I cannot go on writing assessments of blood-stained clothing and seeing human tears."

"Very well, I shall give you an important assignment."

"I am listening, my master."

"I have been told that the ruler of the northern and western countries Juchi Khan, the eldest of Jenghiz Khan's sons, having received into his appanage the northern lands of Khorezm, is on his way to conquer them."

"I can say only this: the blacksmiths and copper-smiths of Gurganj will not surrender their city without a fight, as did the people of Bukhara and Samarkand."

"I must send a letter to Juchi Khan, but along the way, in the sands of the Kyzyl-Kum, detachments have sprung up which stage attacks on the Mongols and kill them. They say that at their head is some 'black horseman' — Kara-Burgut — on a marvelous black steed. He is elusive. He appears suddenly in different corners of the Kyzyl-Kum, covering remarkable distances, and then disappears

¹ *Alyb-baryn!* — Seize him!

without a trace just as suddenly. Rumor has spread through the population that Shaitan himself aids him."

"This black horseman," said Haji Rakhim, "serves as proof that there are still brave jigits among the Muslims."

"I shall give you a letter for Juchi Khan himself. You must hide the letter well, so that it does not fall into the hands of either the Mongol sentries or the black horseman. Otherwise it will mean death for both of us."

Haji Rakhim lowered his gaze. "What kind of a letter is this that endangers its sender?" he wondered. He looked up. The grape leaves intertwined against the gold sky of sunset. Mahmud-Yalvach stood motionless, his gaze seemed to penetrate the dervish's thoughts. He placed his hand on his beard, touched with the silver of time, and a light smile flitted across his face.

"I shall deliver the letter to Juchi Khan," said Haji Rakhim, "and no one will read it. I will carve out a cavity in my staff, put the letter inside and cover it up with wax. But will I succeed in reaching the great khan? He is now fighting in the Kipchak steppe, where gangs of bandits roam, killing anyone they meet. I am like a bug which crawls at your feet along the garden path. What will become of me when I am no longer protected by your mighty hand? I do not fear the 'black horseman', but at the first outpost I will be seized by a Mongol sentry and chopped to pieces."

Mahmud-Yalvach bent over, picked up a red beetle from the path and placed it on his slender white hand. The beetle scurried to the end of a finger and, spreading its wings, flew away.

"Like this beetle, you will pass where a thousand warriors could not. As a holy dervish, you will don your old cloak once again, take your faithful donkey and load it with books. And to keep the Mongol sentries from detaining you, I will give you a gold paitza with a falcon."

"And what should I do with my young brother Tugan?"

"You shall take him with you as your pupil. And there, in the camp of Juchi Khan, he will learn the art of warfare. He will become an experienced jigit. May your journey be fair!"

"Rest assured that I will do everything."

"When you have completed your journey, pray for me; I am an old man who wishes you well."

Chapter Four

THE BLACK HORSEMAN

Haji Rakhim and Tugan started out on their journey toward evening and joined a train of villagers returning from the bazaar with empty baskets. One by one all their companions turned off the road toward their incinerated villages.

Haji Rakhim walked in even, measured strides, singing Arab songs out of habit. Tugan had grown considerably. Long black locks reached all the way to his shoulders from beneath the light-blue turban he wore, as was befitting of young men. He slung the travel sack onto his back and, leaning on a long stick, scampered up the hills with ease and gazed into the distance, at the mountains disappearing into the blue-grey haze; he looked around, trying to take in and comprehend everything. He now lived a full, happy life — one that seemed particularly joyful after the hard months spent in the gloomy, dank underground of the Gurganj prison.

The black donkey, twitching its long ears, minced along, firmly planting its strong hooves. The packs on the donkey contained thick books and scrolls of Arab and Persian poets, as well as a reserve of food to last several days.

From time to time a cloud of dust would rise up in the distance, followed by the appearance of several Mongol horsemen surrounding an important official or guarding slow-moving camels loaded down with sacks of grain.

One of the Mongols would leave the rest, race up to Haji Rakhim and demand, "Who are you? Where are you going?"

Without a word Haji Rakhim would push his cap back on his head. There on his brow, held in place by a narrow band, hung the thin golden plate with the image of a falcon in flight. At the sight of it, the sentry would slowly lower his raised whip, turn his horse around sharply with a cry of, "*Baiartai! Uragsh!*"¹ and race off to overtake his detachment.

¹ *Baiartai! Uragsh!* — Farewell! Onward!

And the dervish, drawing his conical cap back down over his forehead, would march on, taking up a new song:

*Stride ahead, my black Bekir, to music,
To where no living soul dares go.
Men enough have met their end in bed,
But to fall on the red sand a coward is low.*

In a deserted place four horsemen burst out suddenly from behind a hill and stopped, blocking the road.

"Halt!" cried one, an old man with deep wrinkles on his face, black from the scorching sun. "What is your name?"

"I wish you wealth, broad expanses and happiness!" replied the dervish. "Why do you need my name?"

"I recognize you! There's no escaping me. You were a scribe for the Muslim Mahmud-Yalvach, who shamelessly sold himself to the Mongols. You helped him rob the people and for this you shall now have a taste of my sword's sharp blade."

"Your words hold two drops of pure truth, but all the rest is a muddy stream of black lies."

"What do you mean, lies?" the old man roared and drew his curved sabre from its sheath.

"It is true that I was a scribe for the honorable Muslim Mahmud-Yalvach; it is true that I deserve death and shall see it, for who can escape it? But I never robbed anyone; I merely recorded all that was plundered by the Mongols on long scrolls and wrote petitions for all the wronged who came to Mahmud-Yalvach with complaints and requests that he intervene."

"Dervish, if you do not wish to lose your cap along with your head right here on this very spot," the old man continued shouting, "you will follow me at once. And do not try to run away."

"I always go to those who summon me," the dervish said, undaunted. "But you have not told me your name. Against whom shall I lodge my complaint to Allah should you lead us into the abyss of death?"

"Before you go to be judged by Allah, you will be judged by the sword of the 'black horseman'," one of the horsemen replied. "You will not feel much like joking when you are with our chief."

The horsemen, turning off the road, headed directly north, across the scalding yellow sand. Sparse stiff stubble, occasional scanty tamarisk shrubs and lizards scurrying away made the area dismal and cheerless. Tugan whispered to Haji Rakhim, "Could this really be the end for us? Why did you ever consent to this pointless journey?! How quiet and happy was our life in Samarkand!"

"Do not be so quick to complain," replied the dervish. "The day is not over yet, and the future is full of surprises."

The travelers walked on and on, heading always north. At last the horsemen stopped at the intersection of two barely noticeable paths. One of them rode up a hill, gazed for a long time in each direction, then pointed to the west and shouted, "This way, quickly! The sun is setting."

It was completely dark when Haji Rakhim and the others approached a brightly burning fire. They were at the bottom of a dry ravine. The hands of both the dervish and Tugan were bound behind their backs, and the horsemen's lassoes were taut around the prisoners' necks to discourage any thoughts of trying to disappear in the darkness. The old man who had detained them led them both right up to the fire and ordered them to kneel down. The donkey was led up beside them.

On a small rug by the fire sat a lean, sullen Turkmen. His round shining eyes stood out sharply in his tanned, bronze face. At his side lay a straight *konchar* sword.

"Where have I seen this bold jiggit before?" thought Haji Rakhim, observing the Turkmen. "No doubt this is the 'black horseman'..."

He wore a black chekmen, a black cap pushed back on his head, and a tall black horse stood tethered nearby. Some two dozen jigits sat around the fire; their clothes were tattered but they had superb weapons of silver. They all stared at the prisoners — some derisively, others with malice.

One of the jigits removed a carpet bag from the black donkey and shook from it a string of flat cakes and a small bundle with raisins, a melon and a chunk of sour cheese. Then he carefully laid down the second bag, with flour, and emptied out the third carpet bag. In it was a pencil-box with an ink-well, several books and scrolls

and a gunsmith's instruments.

The jigit with the round eyes picked up one of the books, turned it over in his hands, flipped the first few pages and said, "These are probably the hadiths and precepts which the fat, long-bearded imams stuff into the heads of their scrawny starving pupils?"

"No, glorious warrior," replied Haji Rakhim. "This book is about the great Iskender, conqueror of the universe."

"I should like to hear about that brave fighter! But there is no time left for you. Azrael will now carry away your soul."

The old man who had brought Haji Rakhim led the donkey away, unhurriedly drew from his sash a long slender knife, the kind butchers usually use to slaughter sheep, and seized the dervish by the chin with his rough hand.

"Hey, old man, wait!" someone cried. "Our chief wants to know what is written in the other books."

The half-strangled dervish muttered hoarsely, "One book describes the feats of the famous desert leopard Kara-Burgut, the menace of the caravans..."

"Wait! Let him be, old man!.." said the chief of the band and began looking carefully through the book, studying the illustrations depicting battling warriors.

The old man shoved Haji Rakhim aside and walked off, cursing.

Haji Rakhim stared at the dark sky with its brightly twinkling stars, at the red crackling flames of the fire, at the harsh faces of those sitting beside it, at the barren sands all around and thought, "From whence cometh salvation? Even if no one takes pity on me, a wanderer, these warriors ought to take pity on a young gunsmith who slipped out of the darkness of the shah's dungeon. But even as he falls into the abyss, the dervish must not lose heart: his cloak might catch on a protrusion on a cliff, or he will be suspended on the wing of a falcon in flight..."

But beside him Tugan whispered, "Do you not see that our final hour has indeed come?"

"The day has not yet ended," replied the dervish. "The night is still young. Who can tell what it will bring?"

The black horseman placed the book in its yellow leather binding on the rug before him and said, "In a

short while the morning star will come out. There is no need to hurry with the execution of this servant of the infidels. Why not listen to this wanderer? Let him tell of the feats of some brave warrior."

Tugan whispered, "Surely you, humiliated so and forced down on your knees, are not going to tell them tales? Do not say a word. Better that they kill us at once!"

"Have patience," Haji Rakhim replied. "The night is still young, and the future may have something extraordinary in store for us..."

"Let him speak!" sounded some voices. "Sometimes a nightingale in a cage sings better than one in the wild."

"Then listen," Haji Rakhim began. "I shall tell you not of Iskender the Great, nor of Rustem and Zorab, but of the famous bandit of the desert Kara-Burgut and the Turkmen maiden Gyul-Jamal..."

Upon hearing the name Gyul-Jamal the chief of the band threw a quick glance at the dervish and his brows went up in surprise. He lay down on his right side, resting his cheek on the palm of this hand, and with burning black eyes stared intently at the bound story-teller.

Chapter Five

HAJI RAKHIM'S TALE

When she walked by with her quick steps, she touched me with the hem of her garb.

From an Eastern tale

"Gyul-Jamal was a poor shepherd girl in a poor village, in the great Turkmen desert," Haji Rakhim began in a sing-song voice. "Gyul-Jamal knew many songs.

"She had a special song for leading the lambs to water; another, merry and sweet, persuaded the lambs to graze in peace and not wander far away.

"But one distressing song warned the lost lambs with its alarming, abrupt sounds that the wolf was nearby, and the lambs, dozing peacefully in the shade of a wilted bush, would jump up all at once and dash to where Gyul-Jamal stood on a hill with a long stick, while three big

shaggy dogs would run around the stragglers, barking, gathering the whole herd together in one bunch.

"Gyul-Jamal learned all her songs from her grandfather Korkud-Choban, who had been a shepherd for many years and played songs on his long reed-pipe. He was a poor man all his life, hiring himself out as the village shepherd and made a living by going from one yurt to the next, though he had his own yurt, old and crooked like himself, at the edge of the village.

"He was alone since first his wife died, then his two sons were killed during a war the Khorezm Shah waged against the wilful Afghan mountain dwellers.

"The shepherd's daughter, given in marriage to a man in a distant nomad camp, came to him one day carrying a tiny baby girl and died a few days later. Her face was battered and bruised. No one knew what had happened to her, and to all the questions Korkud-Choban replied, 'Clearly it was Allah's will! Not every girl gets a kind husband!' and covered his dark wrinkled face with his sleeve.

"At first Korkud-Choban guarded and tended his granddaughter as he would a lame lamb, and when he wandered across the steppe with the flock he carried the girl in a leather sack on his back, at times together with an ailing, bleating lamb.

"Little by little Gyul-Jamal grew and was now able to run alongside him; she sang in her shrill little voice when her grandfather played the reed-pipe, and looked after the stragglers along with the dogs. When Gyul-Jamal grew a little older Korkud announced one day that he would not be the shepherd any longer, that he had decided to lie on a felt mat in front of his old yurt from then on, and in his stead his granddaughter would tend the young lambs. At this time his old sister arrived on a haggard donkey and moved into the yurt with him. Everyone in the village said that Korkud had met Shaitan in the steppe and sold him his granddaughter in marriage. Others said the old man had found a treasure in an ancient burial mound, and many other tales were woven around him. But the truth of the matter was that Korkud did suddenly have a very old copper pot, smoke billowed continuously above the yurt, and the poor shepherd treated visitors to tea.

"At last the time came for the old man to marry off

his grown granddaughter. And the bride-price for such a girl might bring him a camel and a horse and a cow and sheep all at once. Then the old man would be set for life -- he would merely lie on his felt mat, drink as much koumiss as he liked and stare at the clouds by day and the stars by night. In the meantime, his sister would tend the livestock.

"Korkud was in no hurry to give his granddaughter away. For everyone who came seeking Gyul-Jamal's hand in marriage, the old man raised the price, so that all the matchmakers left empty-handed, marveling at the greediness of the former shepherd. But there was one who would come back to seek her hand again and again. This was the famed leopard of the great roads, menace of the caravans, the bandit Kara-Burgut.¹

"'If one loves a girl,' said Kara-Burgut, 'one does not bicker over the price.' And he promised to give as much as old Korkud asked for. But every night when the bandit came the old man refused to give a final answer, saying that he would think it over.

"However, Shaitan played a joke on the old man, and in one fell swoop he lost the camels and the horses and the sheep he had counted as he gazed at the stars. The jigits of the shah himself came to the village to collect the taxes for the last, current and following years. They drove off many horses and livestock and took Gyul-Jamal, saying that the almighty shah's subjects were obliged to surrender the most beautiful maidens to him.

"In the middle of the night the bandit Kara-Burgut came to Korkud-Choban's yurt. He sat all night on the edge of the mat asking in detail about the jigits who had come: who had their leader been, what kind of horses had they ridden, and with what kind of saddles and saddle-cloths. He questioned the old man persistently and said, 'Now I shall recognize them all even in the night and finish them off one by one and all together, even were they to hide from me at the bottom of the Sea of Khorezm. And I will find Gyul-Jamal and deliver her to you, grandfather Korkud, and then we shall have a great celebration, after which I will take her back to my yurt as my wife. I promised you a camel, a mare with a colt, a

¹*Kara-Burgut* — black eagle.

cow with a calf and nine sheep, and now I offer you nine times that, only you must not promise your granddaughter to anyone but me.'

"As a deposit of sorts, Kara-Burgut tossed a sack of silver dirhams in the old man's lap, mounted his horse and disappeared in the black of the night..."

With these words Haji Rakhim stopped short and, groaning, doubled over and fell on one side.

"Then what happened? Did the bandit find the maiden?" clamored the jigits sitting around the fire.

"*Vai-ulyai!* What only did not happen to the brave bandit and the fair maiden!" answered Haji Rakhim with a moan. "But I cannot continue the story: the cords have cut into my body and I am tired."

"Untie him!" ordered the black horseman.

"And untie my younger brother's wounded hands as well!" said Haji Rakhim and, rolling over on his back, closed his eyes.

The old Turkmen, grumbling to himself, untied the two prisoners. They settled more comfortably on the sand, and the dervish went on:

"When at dawn Kara-Burgut was riding across the steppe, he met Jelal ed-Din, son of the padishah himself. The youth had lost his way in pursuit of a gazelle, and his retinue had fallen behind. He was dying of hunger and thirst by now, leading his weary horse behind him, when he caught sight of old Korkud-Choban's yurt. The old man received him hospitably, let him rest, and fed both him and his horse. At that time Kara-Burgut chanced to come along and enter the yurt. He spoke for quite some time with the son of his enemy, not even suspecting his true identity. In parting the shah's young heir invited Kara-Burgut to visit him at his country palace Tillyaly. Thus the bandit learned that before him was the son of the hateful shah. But the law of hospitality demands absolute respect for the guest, so without causing him any harm Kara-Burgut promised to call on the young khan.

"Kara-Burgut soon set out for the capital to visit the shah's son. But this young khan was out of favor with the shah for befriending simple people and receiving desert nomads and wandering dervishes and travelers from faraway countries at his residence. The shah, who feared

that his son might be plotting against him, watched his every move. Therefore, spies hidden around the palace and the garden kept surveillance of everyone who came and went.

"When Kara-Burgut arrived at the Tillyaly palace, the shah's son received him graciously, offered him a lavish supper, while musicians played and sang old war songs. That night, when Kara-Burgut wanted to set out on his way, the khan suggested that he stay till morning — then he would give him an escort to ensure his safe passage to the city's border.

"'Who will dare touch Kara-Burgut?' said the bandit. 'My sword does not fear twenty jigits, should they decide to attack me...' And he went out through the garden gate. But at once a sturdy fisherman's net was thrown over him, ensnaring his arms so that he had no time even to draw his sword. The jigits hauled him off and delivered him, bound, to the house of judgement and torture.

"During the night the head executioner, the 'prince of wrath' Jikhan-Pekhlevan, took to interrogating Kara-Burgut, pressing red-hot coals to his body, trying to find out what he had been doing in the young khan's garden.

"'I promised the bek I would steal the finest steed from among the Tatar khan's herds,' Kara-Burgut insisted.

"At last Jikhan-Pekhlevan grew tired of interrogating and torturing the obstinate jigit and ordered him taken away to the Tower of Retribution.

"Kara-Burgut was led to the high tower in the dark, the executioners surrounding him in a tight circle. All of a sudden someone whispered softly in his ear, 'Reach up to the right and grab hold of the iron hook.' And at once he felt the ropes that bound his hands loosen, cut by an invisible ally. Not letting on that he was now ready to defend himself, Kara-Burgut entered the tower submissively and climbed up a long winding staircase. At the top, by the faint light of a torch, a small door was opened. The bandit resisted with all his might when they wanted to shove him through that door. The torch went out suddenly, and Kara-Burgut freed one hand and easily found the big iron hook to the right. Someone cried, 'One dog less!' The door slammed shut with a bang and Kara-Burgut was left hanging in pitch darkness, feeling no

support beneath his feet...

"Kara-Burgut hung, trying to free his left hand from the ropes, which he managed to do with great difficulty, and then it became easier to hang there, gripping the hook with both hands. When morning drew near and the first rays of sunlight penetrated the cracks in the old tower, the jigit realized that he was hanging just under the roof: below him was a deep abyss from which came howling; black shadows moved about and he could make out piles of bones. If help from his secret friends did not come soon he would perish, for he hadn't the strength to hold on much longer."

"Then what happened?" voices demanded when Haji Rakhim again fell silent and took to staring despondently at the fire. "What happened to Kara-Burgut, to Gyul-Jamal? Speak up!"

"Perhaps you will give my boy some bread and water? And I too should like to wet my throat: I haven't had a sip of water since morning..."

"Give him bread, raisins and everything that I have," the black horseman ordered. "Go on, dervish, sunrise is not far off now..."

Haji Rakhim, having slowly drunk a cup of sour milk, resumed his story:

"In the meantime the shah's son was entertaining himself light-heartedly in his garden beneath a sprawling elm, feeding his beloved stallions slices of melon. Suddenly he was approached by a man shrouded to his very eyes — one of his many devoted friends — who quietly told him that his guest from the desert had been seized at the wall of his garden, taken to the head of the shah's guard and from there to the Tower of Retribution.

"The young khan was enraged. He ordered all his jigits to mount their horses and be prepared for battle. With a hundred armed horsemen Jelal ed-Din raced to the city, driving away the street sentries who came rushing out to intercept them, and galloped right up to the high old tower, near the site where executions were carried out. The guard fled in fear, and the jigits broke the door down with axes. Jelal ed-Din climbed the stairs to the very top of the tower, where there was a second door that had to be broken down.

"When they got it open they shrank back: a black

emptiness began right at the doorway, and to the right a man hung along the wall, clinging to a rather small iron hook. The jigits carefully pulled him into the stairway. Jelal ed-Din took a torch and tried to see to the bottom. Shining eyes stared up from the depths and vicious growling resounded off the walls. The khan hurled the burning torch into the abyss. Spinning, it tumbled down, and there were yelps as the big, shaggy man-eating dogs scurried away.

“‘I swear,’ he said, ‘that if I were to become shah, I would keep these horrid creatures that they might devour those who invented this tower.’”

“The young khan came down from the tower and mounted his horse. A second saddled horse awaited Kara-Burgut. The jigits rode through the city in a tight crowd, and only when they had passed through the stone gates, when the even expanses of the endless steppe opened up before them, did Jelal ed-Din say to the rescued Kara-Burgut, ‘I hope you did not think that I invited you to my palace intentionally so that you would fall into the hands of the shah’s executioners. I would like to invite you back to my garden at Tillyaly, but I fear you might fall into the paws of the fiendish servants of Jikhan-Pekhlevan once again...’

“‘Such dark thoughts did not cross my mind. With your permission, I would like to return to my native desert. Though it has but barren sand, sparse grass and salty water, there is more freedom and happiness there than here among fine palaces, high towers and strong walls.’”

“‘I shall not detain you. I should like to carry out some wish of yours, for, after all, you have suffered because of me.’”

“‘I have but one request. My tormentors took my trusty sword when they ensnared me in that fishing net. Until I take it back from the braggart who dares to wear it, would you not permit me to borrow a sabre from one of your jigits?’”

“The young khan took his sabre, adorned with turquoise, carnelians and rubies, and handed it to Kara-Burgut.

“‘Carry it with glory and draw it from its sheath only against the enemies of our tribe, not against the peaceful caravan travelers. This noble black steed on which you

are now sitting is yours too from this moment on. Astride it you will set out on campaigns against the enemies of our homeland.'

" 'I have one other request of you,' said Kara-Burgut.

" 'Speak!'

" 'Could you who knows all that transpires in the shah's palace tell me what has become of the girl of our Turkmen tribe by the name of Gyul-Jamal? The shah's robbers took her away by force, saying she would be brought to the palace to delight the ageing shah.'

" 'Yes, I know. The shah ordered a special yurt erected for this girl Gyul-Jamal in one of the palace gardens. But the girl proved to be proud and rebellious. I fear the same sad fate will befall her as befalls all of our shah's rebellious captives.'

" 'I thank you, my gracious redeemer!' said Kara-Burgut. 'Should you need my life, call on me and I shall come at once, even if I must cross mountains and precipices to reach you.'

"Kara-Burgut turned his black horse around and galloped off to his desert. Soon he changed his course and came out on the road that lead to the fairest of cities — Samarkand, smothered in gardens.

"The horse stepped slowly, while the jiggit sang:

*The wind sings to me my loved one's call,
How can I such call not obey?
Be death lurking beyond every cliff,
Waiting in silence along every way...¹*

"Kara-Burgut grew so absorbed in his thoughts that he was nearly knocked off his horse by several jigits, galloping at full pelt and shouting, 'Clear the road! Clear the road! A messenger to the padishah. A letter to be delivered into the padishah's own hands!'

"Several horsemen raced in a cloud of dust, tugging behind them a taut lasso; the end of the lasso was tied to the pommel of the saddle. The messenger, who was fastened to the galloping horse with ropes, slept soundly, his head bouncing up and down.

"The messenger's horse was clearly at the end of its

¹ From an ancient Arabic song.

tether trying to make it to the city gates; it snorted, thrashed its tail and raced on only because it was being pulled on a rope by the jigits galloping ahead, for a messenger of the shah was usually escorted from one village to the next.

"All at once the horse went plummeting to the ground. The horsemen stopped, leaped from their horses and tried to raise the wasted, driven horse, but to no avail: blood trickled from its nostrils onto the dusty road.

"The messenger remained lying as he had fallen. He said only, 'An important letter to the shah from his daughter, besieged by rebels in the fortress tower. In Samarkand there is an uprising of all the people against the shah's executioners and tax-collectors. The people are slaughtering them and hanging the mutilated bodies from the poplars. And I must die anyway...'

"With these words the messenger rested his head on his fist and closed his eyes. Kara-Burgut rode up to the messenger and said, 'Give me your leather purse. I shall deliver the letter into the padishah's hands myself. And you, do not lie here beside this dead horse. Go lie down over there, in the shade of the trees and get a good sleep. I know you are in no hurry to deliver this letter, and you have to be dragged by force since the messenger who brings ill tidings must lose his head.'

" 'I too think it is better for me to rest here,' said the dust-covered messenger and gave Kara-Burgut his purse. Then he moved off the road, sank to the grass and began to snore.

"Kara-Burgut, fixing the end of the lasso to the pommel of his saddle, cried, 'Onward!' and all the horsemen went charging down the road once again toward the shah's capital.

"Kara-Burgut along with the escort came racing up to the high palace gates. All doors were opened before the messenger with important tidings from the padishah's daughter. An old eunuch, clanking his keys, led the messenger along winding passages, and Kara-Burgut was about to appear before the country's formidable ruler, when suddenly he heard a female cry through the wall, 'Help me! My last day has come!'

"Could Kara-Burgut fail to recognize that tender voice, now full of terror and crying for help! He pulled out the

sabre given him by Jelal ed-Din and, raising it over the old eunuch's head, ordered him to open the door. Like a tiger Kara-Burgut lunged into the room all hung with carpets. He looked for the shah, wanting to kill him, certain that it was he who was tormenting their Turkmen girl. There was not a soul in the room, however, while in the corner, on a pile of Persian shawls, lay a yellow, black-spotted leopard trying to claw through the carpet from beneath which came the muffled cries.

"The jigit killed the beast with two strokes of his sabre and threw the carpet aside. Before him, pale and practically lifeless, lay Gyul-Jamal.

"'What villain could sick a predatory beast on a frail woman!' Kara-Burgut roared and bent over the one who had occupied his every thought for so long.

"Into the room burst the shah himself. In his rage he wanted to execute on the spot the jigit who had killed his favorite leopard. But Kara-Burgut handed him the letter with dignity. The shah, stunned by the news of the uprising in Samarkand and the attack on his daughter, ordered the commander of the troops to prepare at once for a campaign to pacify and punish the rebels; he no longer paid the jigit any heed. Kara-Burgut took Gyul-Jamal up in his arms and carried her back to the white yurt amidst a peach orchard and told her servants that tomorrow the old men would come from the desert with a caravan that would take Gyul-Jamal back to her native village.

"But the next day the old men were not permitted to see Gyul-Jamal and were expelled from the palace. They were told that Gyul-Jamal, for her attempt on the great padishah's life, had been thrown into the Tower of Eternal Oblivion, where she would remain 'forever and unto death'..."

"And did she die there?" someone asked.

Haji Rakhim hesitated, then said, "No, Gyul-Jamal is alive to this day, locked in the stone tower in Gurganj. The shah's wicked mother Turkan-Khatun ordered her kept there, and though the old woman herself fled from the capital of Khorezm like a cowardly hyena, the mindless judges, the watchdogs of morality and the guards do not dare violate the order given by the hateful queen and continue to hold Gyul-Jamal and many other

innocent prisoners captive.”

“Tell me, dervish, how do you know all this?” asked the black horseman rising from the rug. “Why, all that you say is no tale at all, but real life...”

“We wanderers of the deserts of the universe move among people and hear talk of all kinds. Besides which, the wind of the desert has whispered this tale to me many a time.”

“Bek jigits!” the black horseman addressed those sitting around the fire. “Make ready! At dawn I shall set out for Gurganj.”

“If you wish to reach Gurganj, make haste,” said Haji Rakhim. “The sons of the Tatar kagan are advancing on the city from three sides with an enormous army. They will surround the city with a solid ring, and then you will not get in.”

“And you, dervish, will come with me,” said the black horseman. “I shall give you and your companion a couple of horses, and in three days we shall be at the gates of Gurganj. And you, my comrades, head back to your camps and wait for my summons. Whether I return to you or Azrael hauls me off to the fiery valley, who but Allah can tell?..”

Chapter Six

THREE SONS OF JENGHIZ KHAN QUARREL OVER GURGANJ

Jenghiz Khan ordered his son Tule Khan to capture and plunder the ancient city of Merv, while he gave permission to the three older sons, Juchi, Jagatai and Ugedei, to head with their armies for the capital of Khorezm, Gurganj, and conquer it.

All the Mongols wanted to participate in the campaign for this wealthiest city of Muslim lands, which sent caravans with fine fabrics, chain mail and other prized goods to all corners of the universe. Every participant in the assault would bring back at least a couple of horses or camels loaded with silk garments, necklaces of rubies and emeralds, goblets and all kinds of other rare objects. What's more, each would acquire several skilled slaves

who would weave cloth, sew boots or coats while their master would lie peacefully on a rug brought back from the war and listen to a musician, also taken prisoner in Gurganj, play the lute.

Such were the dreams of the Mongol warriors as they advanced north toward the banks of the river Jaihun, to the rich plains of Khorezm.

Jenghiz Khan's sons Jagatai and Ugedei were in a hurry to arrive first in order to seize the city before their elder brother Juchi appeared on the scene. For, by the will of the great kagan, all of Khorezm along with the Kipchak steppe was to fall into his possession.

Juchi Khan, enraged that his brothers had been permitted to get a share of the riches in the future capital of his appanage, decided not to hurry; he engaged in his favorite sport of hunting wild horses and said indifferently, "They cannot take Gurganj without me anyway. For all I care they can break their heads trying."

Jagatai, in the meantime, envious and greedy, swore during his drinking bouts, "Juchi received too great an appanage and wants to possess all the best himself. I will not give him Gurganj; I will turn it to ruins first."

Gurganj, the capital of the dynasty of Khorezm shahs, a city of pompous Kipchak khans, wealthy merchants, skilled craftsmen and slaves from many tribes, experienced distressing times after the Mongol invasion of Mavera-un-Nahr.

Following the flight of queen Turkan-Khatun, who had held the city on a tight leash, and the departure of the entire clan of the Khorezm shahs' dynasty, the populous city was ruled by Kipchak leaders. Each one of them dreamed of becoming the supreme ruler of the Muslim lands if only for a month, or even a day. However, while the khans and beks argued, the Kipchak bek Humar-Tegin, not waiting to be raised on the "white felt of honor", declared himself the sultan of Khorezm. Everyone submitted to him unconditionally, and the grey-bearded imams began diligently praying in the mosques in his behalf.

The reign of the new ruler of Khorezm Humar-Tegin was marked first and foremost by religious fervency: he ordered anyone who did not attend prayer at the mosque

daily to be hunted down and imprisoned. In addition to armed sentries the watchdogs of morality now permeated the entire city. With clubs they went about establishing order and punishing the insufficiently pious. The new sultan appointed his relative Alla ed-Din el-Haiati the head of the city guard and increased the number of night watchmen to be paid for by the introduction of new taxes. However, the number of robberies in the city did not diminish in the slightest, granaries and storehouses with rice being the primary target. Alarm grew — everyone feared the lot in store for the inhabitants of the great city once the terrible Mongol soldiers arrived.

Sultan Humar-Tegin calmed the people through the public criers and the imams, assuring them that the Mongols had no intention of attacking Gurganj, that they were already sated, having pillaged Bukhara, Samarkand and Merv, and were already preparing to head back to their steppes.

Gurganj, so it seemed, went on living its usual life: every morning the muezzins summoned all Muslims to prayer from the heights of the minarets; merchants sat by their displayed wares at the bazaars, enticing potential buyers; passers-by walked the narrow streets in a continuous stream, but trade and manufacturing in the city was expiring with every day.

The merchants complained that trade was declining and had come to a near halt for some. Buyers merely inquired as to prices, smacking their lips and shaking their heads but making no purchases, even though the prices of goods had already dropped by one half.

Only foodstuffs grew ever more expensive, and the city inhabitants hurried to buy up flour and grain and beans, foreseeing that the delivery of food would stop.

Gathering on street corners, they would whisper to one another, "The Tatars are near. The Tatars are approaching in great forces. The Tatars are going to besiege our city. The walls are tall and strong, so the siege will last for a long time. We shall eat all the sheep and horses, and then what will we do? Where can we run, where can we hide?"

Various incredible rumors would either alarm or gladden the people, "Jelal ed-Din has gathered an army of

five hundred thousand. He is moving toward Gurganj. He has crushed a large Tatar army which then fled to the east..."

Others said, "The Tatars will dash back and forth beside the walls but will not be able to take them. For who can take Gurganj? Then they will go away to the north. The old people know this..."

Camels began leaving the city in caravans. Women and children peered out of the large baskets that hung on either side in place of packs; they were leaving for the Turkmens in Manghishlak. At the same time other caravans were arriving in the city — with horses, carts and donkeys. They brought the families of distinguished beks who had fled their estates and were hurrying to hide behind the high strong walls of Gurganj.

Bread sellers began disappearing from the bazaars, bakeries shut down. The prices of sheep and horses rose, and even an ordinary donkey came to cost as much as a fine horse had but a short time before.

The Mongols appeared before the city suddenly, in broad daylight. No one even realized at once what had happened. A group of nomads halted by the southern gates, bringing their livestock in from the steppe. A flock of sheep and a herd of cattle stopped by the bridge across the canal while the guards collected payment from the shepherds for a pass into the city.

All of a sudden some two hundred horsemen, unusually dressed, resembling neither Turkmens nor Kipchaks, emerged from the clouds of white dust raised by the herd of livestock. These men on small but swift horses began snatching sheep up into their saddles and driving away the rest of the flock, shouting and wrestling with the shepherds.

Then the men on horses killed several of the shepherds who put up a fight and, whistling and cracking their whips, they leisurely drove the herd back away from the city, crossed the big canal and headed slowly on.

Alarm sprang up in the city. Sultan Humar-Tegin sent a thousand Kipchaks to overtake the insidious robbers and bring them back alive for execution.

Chapter Seven

KARA-KONCHAR SEEKS THE END OF THE STORY

Thy lovely gait I long to see once more,
And my heart I would give
for the murmur of thy lips.

From a Persian song

Fleeing the Mongols, Kara-Konchar made his way across the desert to the river Jaihun. From time to time Mongol detachments could be seen in the distance, stretching out in chains. They were all moving north toward Gurganj. Kara-Konchar was forced to head back into the desert, take long detours, make inquiries of the occasional nomads scurrying about the Kyzyl-Kum in terror, for the Mongols were advancing from all directions.

Two Turkmens in tall sheepskin hats, their faces blackened by the scalding sun, rode along with Kara-Konchar. They were the ever downcast boy and the bearded dervish.

At night, by the faint light of the crescent moon, the travelers made their way unnoticed to the bank of a swelled river. They followed a boar's path through the tall reeds and found themselves near the water. Several large and cumbersome boats with bows raised high out of the water sailed by. Inside them were people, horses, sheep. They replied to the travelers' cries and pleas to be taken aboard with, "Allah will help you, we have no room."

From one boat came the response, "One true believer does not abandon another in trouble!"

And the helmsman steered the boat toward shore. He agreed to take them all the way to Gurganj.

"How much do you ask for the ride?" asked Kara-Konchar.

"Don't give it a thought! These days money and things and livestock — nothing has a price, everything is mixed up. You are in trouble, and I too am in trouble: my house was destroyed, my family slain. For what and for whom is there to save money? Climb aboard!"

The large sturdy boat took the travelers and their horses and swiftly set sail, tossing on the murky rapids

of the wide river Jaihun. Now and again Mongol patrols appeared on the right bank. Then the boat would hug the left bank. Four days later the boat entered the wide canal that divided Gurganj into two parts: the old town, surrounded by a high wall, and the outskirts, where houses hid among mulberry trees.

Kara-Konchar took a leather pouch from inside his sash, counted out ten gold dinars and put them in the boat owner's broad palm.

"I do not know if we shall chance to meet again. Tell me at least your name."

The helmsman grunted and pushed his red turban back on his head.

"My name is Kerim-Gulem. I am a blacksmith. And you I know, though you have not said your name. This black stallion with light slender legs and a swan-like neck can belong to none other than the hero of tales and songs now told and sung by all. If you plan to fight with the pagans here, I shall join your troop."

Kara-Konchar was no longer listening. He was staring intently into the distance: along the opposite side of the canal a cloud of dust was approaching.

Soon he could make out the figures of Kipchak soldiers clinging to their horses' manes. They were shouting, whipping their horses and from afar came a hollow rumbling and the roar of hoarse voices.

In the lead rode a man on a large white horse. He swayed in the saddle, very nearly toppling over. His white turban and yellow robe were spattered with blood; his horse was streaked with red and a long arrow stuck out of its neck.

The Kipchaks flew across the bridge with lightning speed.

"They are near, they are behind us! Run for your lives!" came their desperate cries.

Near the city gates Kara-Konchar held back his black stallion, who danced and reared at the sight of the charging steeds.

The Kipchaks raced through the gates, and Kara-Konchar and his companions followed them. The gates screeched closed and the guards boarded them up with thick logs.

One of the horsemen stopped near the guards and

began telling them, "The new sultan Humar-Tegin sent us to capture two hundred Mongols. They had made off with our livestock. When they saw us they fled like so many frightened rats, abandoning the captured flock. Little did we know that they had prepared a trap and our death! Near the Tillyaly gardens some two thousand of those vicious pagans ambushed us. They surrounded us on all sides, struck from afar with long arrows, threw riders down and captured their horses. All our brave men fell there! This is all that remains of our detachment. Why ever did the sultan send us to that carnage?"

"Why did you choose such a swine for a sultan?" exclaimed Kara-Konchar.

Everyone looked around: who had dared say such a thing about the sultan?

But Kara-Konchar went on shouting:

"Allah and cowardliness drove that evil bitch, Queen Turkan-Khatun, and that whole gang of spongers from Khorezm. The fat-bottomed Shah Muhammad fled; now the dogs are tearing at his carrion! Now that this pack of jackals has been scattered by the whirlwind, you go and choose for yourselves a new garden scarecrow, Humar-Tegin! A clever master would not even trust him with a herd of mangy goats, while you have made him the commander of the troops, entrusted the defense of the city to him!.. You are a servile tribe! You cannot live without being flogged..."

Two jigits, companions of Kara-Konchar, shielded him.

"Quiet, Kara-Konchar! Do not forget we are surrounded by Kipchaks. They are of one race with the shah. Let us leave here!"

The warriors and guards who were near the gates were struck dumb by the words of the black horseman.

"Who is that brave jigit? Why, he spoke the truth. For has Humar-Tegin ever distinguished himself in battle, is he known for selflessness or intelligence? All his power lies in the fact that he followed Queen Turkan-Khatun around with his tail between his legs. With a sultan like him we are all doomed."

Kara-Konchar rode slowly down the main street of Gurganj and stared at the people he met with severe eyes. He told his companions, "Head for the bazaar and find

Merdan's tea-room there. Everyone knows it. Wait for me there. I shall go on alone."

Half of the shops at the bazaar were closed. In those which were piled high with silks and fine woolen fabrics, the keepers no longer called out to buyers. They sat despondently in a circle and speculated upon what would happen next.

"If the enemy besieges the city we shall not sell a single scrap. Who will want to buy anything when the pagans burst into the city like wild beasts, carrying off whatever they please for free? We can't even be sure we'll survive ourselves."

The Tower of Eternal Oblivion was located near the palace of the Khorezm Shah. One side faced out on a square. As he rode up to it, Kara-Konchar stared at the small round air-vents that served as windows and thought, "Where, behind which window, is she hidden, that flower of the desert? Is she alive? And if she is alive, has she preserved the sweet features of her innocent face, her shining eyes and delicate feminine hands? People lose their minds in that terrible tower, women turn into feeble old hags... Perhaps Gyul-Jamal too, bound to the wall by a chain, is now..." And he was filled with horror at the thought of who he might find. Better death, instant death in battle, than to see her, the light of his life, changed, deformed, insane...

At the foot of the tower near a low iron door, a bearded guard with a curved old sabre on his lap dozed on the steps. Beside him on a small rug lay a few dried loaves and two black copper dirhams in a wooden cup. Relatives had not been caring for the prisoners much of late; they thought only of themselves, how to survive! While all the while withered bony hands were held out through the openings in the walls and shrieks could be heard, "Remember the sufferers! Throw a piece of bread to those deprived of light!"

"Hey, old man, come here!" said Kara-Konchar to the guard.

The old man woke up, shook his grey beard and fixed his gaze on the jigit, with no intention of getting up.

"What do you want?"

Kara-Konchar moved closer to the old man, who stood up.

"Take this coin and tell me if many new prisoners have been put in the tower."

"And if there have been many, it is none of your business."

"But there remain, no doubt, a fair number of old prisoners as well."

"Whoever has not yet died of filth, tics and hunger still hangs on the hook of hope."

"Here is another dinar. Tell me if there are any women among the prisoners."

"There are two old hags; the new sultan sent them here because they cast spells and wanted to inflict him with illness."

"Are there no young women?"

"Why do you pester me? What are you: a judge, the head of the executioners or a senior imam of a mosque? I have no right to speak with you. Perhaps you are a bandit and wish to release other cutthroats. Take your money back and get out of here."

Kara-Konchar raised his whip and was about to strike the guard when someone's gentle hand restrained him. He turned around. A tall old man with hair down to his shoulders, dressed in rags, met Kara-Konchar's wrathful gaze with burning eyes.

"Clearly you do not know the local ways and that is why you speak so with this old man. Let us go away from here and I will explain everything to you. Take a look around: even as you spoke a dozen of the sultan's executioners came out through the gate; they keep looking in this direction, ready to pounce on you... Come with me quickly away from here, heed my words."

Kara-Konchar spurred his horse and followed the queer old man. Once in an alley the old man quickened his pace and soon turned down a deserted street. Here he stopped.

"Let it come as no surprise that I spoke to you. I have been coming to the prison for a whole year now, bringing bread to my master who was thrown in the dungeon. He is called Mirza-Yusuf; he was a chronicler under Khorezm Shah Muhammad. The shah favored him and showered him with kindness. But when that old hyena Turkan-Khatun was made 'the great sword of wrath and the spear of might' in Khorezm, she had pity on neither

the grey hair nor feebleness of Mirza-Yusuf and threw him into the dungeon..."

"But what for?"

"For having called her in his book 'a dark stain on the cloak of mighty Khorezm' and describing all her foul deeds. This was reported to the queen, and now I roam the city begging for handouts which I take to the prison to feed the helpless old man. I am waiting for the unknown nomads to burst into this city. When they start slaughtering the population and the shah's executioners scurry away like mice, I shall run to the prison, strangle that vile guard with my own hands and free all the prisoners and old Mirza-Yusuf along with them. Then I will go back to my native land."

"Is your native land far away?"

"Very far indeed! I am from the Russian land, and they call me Saklab — old man Slavko in our tongue."

Kara-Konchar grew pensive.

"Tell me, bek jigit, who are you looking for?" the old man went on. "Perhaps I can be of some help to you?"

"Are there many women in the prison? The guard said there were only two old hags."

"He is a liar! Did you notice some small air-vents in the tower, high up, beneath the roof? There are small cells there. Several women from the shah's harem were put there for showing disobedience."

"Are there any Turkmen women among them?"

The old man stopped to think for a moment.

"I shall find out. That guard loves money. Though he is dressed as a pauper, he is actually quite rich. Of all the donations made for the prisoners, he gives them barely half and keeps the rest for himself. He has a house and a garden and a harem of eight wives... I will try to help you. Do you see that old wicket gate beneath the tree? My master, the chronicler Mirza-Yusuf used to live here. I keep watch over his house and his books... He raised a girl, Bent-Zankija; she helped him copy books. But she went to Bukhara and then disappeared. Now I am left alone..."

"I trust in you, old man Saklab, and I do not think you desire my death. Tomorrow morning I will be here..."

Chapter Eight

TO TAKE GURGANJ IT MUST FIRST BE DESTROYED

Once having arrived in Khorezm, the Mongol army did not immediately undertake a siege of its capital. First the Mongols settled in the villages near Gurganj, driving the local inhabitants into their camps as prisoners. Both of Jenghiz Khan's sons, Ugedei and Jagatai, took up residence in the palace at Tillyaly, while their military commanders — Kadan, Bogurji, Tulen-Jerbi, Tajibek and others — were engaged in the hasty preparation of besieging equipment, catapults and "turtles" on wheels. Chinese engineers, brought from far away, promised to erect storming machines that would help take the city quickly.

One matter of difficulty proved to be the lack of rocks in the vicinity — there was nothing to hurl. Then the Chinamen suggested that large cannonballs be hewed out of mulberry trees and soaked for a long time in water, until they assumed the necessary hardness.

Independent Mongol detachments would appear at different sides of the city, enter into battle with detachments of horsemen leaving through the gates and race away, trying once again to draw them into ambush. But the warriors of Gurganj were on their guard now and returned under the protection of their walls.

Sultan Humar-Tegin stood in command of the army in the city, and his closest assistants were Ogul-Hajib (the defender of Bukhara), Er-Buka-Pekhlevan and Ali-Durugi. At a military council Humar-Tegin showed some unsigned letters distributed by the Mongols. They encouraged the population to open the city gates and trust the Mongols, who would bring them no harm.

"Why not come to an agreement with them?" said the sultan. "Better to pay them a large tribute and end this business in peace than subject the people to the horrors of invasion, slaughter and fires."

Ogul-Hajib and others objected:

"Padishah, you must have forgotten what the Mongols did to Bukhara, Samarkand, Merv and other cities? There the people also pleaded for mercy and threw down their arms. The Mongols selected the best craftsmen and sent them back to Mongolia, while the rest were killed with bludgeons."

"All the same, we must find out what the Mongols want."

That night Sultan Humar-Tegin left Gurganj with a small retinue and came to the palace where Jagatai and Ugedei were having a feast. He stood before them, hands folded on his chest, in the pose of a supplicant.

"What have you brought us?" Ugedei asked with a laugh. "Where are the gold keys to the gates?"

"I bow down before the majesty and power of the sovereign of the East, Jenghiz Khan, and I want to serve him, as do the other beks."

"We need the city, Gurganj, and not turncoats like you!" replied the sullen Jagatai. "How can we believe one word of yours if you have abandoned your own people and are even prepared to go against them? Take him!"

The executioners seized Humar-Tegin and all his companions. They tore off their clothes, broke their spines without shedding a drop of blood and threw them in a ravine where, half-dead, they were devoured by jackals and dogs.

When Jenghiz Khan's eldest son Juchi arrived with his army, Gurganj was already inside a tight ring of Mongol troops. In order to move the catapults up to the walls, three thousand Mongols and a mob of prisoners took to rebuilding the bridge across the canal. All at once a detachment of brave warriors led by the Turkmen Kara-Konchar flew out of the gates of Gurganj. They took the working Mongols by surprise and killed them all, leaving a whole mound of bodies on the bridge. This success inspired the besieged city.

Then the Mongols moved all their troops toward the city. They drove up many thousands of captured villagers and forced them to fill in the moat around the walls. This enabled them to haul up the machines and begin storming the city. The catapults hurled the soaked wooden cannonballs and Chinese jugs with an inflammable liquid. It caused such a fierce fire that wooden structures were consumed by huge flames that were impossible to extinguish.

The troops of Juchi Khan attacked from the north, undertaking the most resolute measures to capture the city. Prisoners were forced to dig an underground passage

beneath the walls. The Mongols penetrated the city and, after a desperate fight, the large white banner of the great Lagan's son unfurled on the northern guard tower.

This incited Jagatai's envy and rage. He launched one detachment after another against the walls of Gurganj, but their defenders demonstrated incredible perseverance, hurling bricks at those who tried to climb up, and drenching them with boiling water and hot tar, so that the assailants fell in heaps, scalded and scathed.

Chapter Nine

KARA-KONCHAR IN THE TOWER OF ETERNAL OBLIVION

Kara-Konchar came to meet the old man Saklab by the wicket gate beneath the tree several times in vain. Then at last he saw him. The old man was no longer in rags as he had been, but wore a striped robe and a blue turban on his head. It was not easy to recognize him at once.

"Forgive me, brave bek jigiti, that I could not tell you earlier all that I have learned and done. The prison guard will not utter a word. Apparently he fears the shah's executioners, or else he is in cahoots with them. I broached the subject this way and that, offered to clear the prison for him, but that merely roused his anger. But when I offered to work at his home for a couple of flat loaves a day he was very pleased and made me the overseer of his eight wives... And when I beat his mean head wife, he rewarded me with this robe and this old turban —"

"Why do you prattle on about wives and robes?!" said Kara-Konchar in a rage. "I gave you five gold dinars. What have you done? Did you find out everything I asked for?"

"Of course I did! Even if Nazar-bobo keeps silent, do you really suppose his wives are capable of doing the same? They pried everything out of him long ago, and I got everything out of them... There are several cells in that prison tower, clinging to the inside of the walls like swallows' nests. But in the center of the tower the logs have rotted and the floor has caved in to the very dungeon."

"May Shaitan cave in on you as well!"

"The cells may be reached only with great difficulty by climbing up wooden ladders tied with rotted ropes. The guard Nazar-bobo used to climb them himself, but now he is afraid —"

"Who is held in these cells?"

"People who roused the Khorezm Shah's wrath. In one of the cells, just under the roof, a young Turkmen woman is imprisoned —"

"Tell me her name!" the jiggit seized the old man by the shoulder.

"They say her name is Gyul-Jamal."

"You will lead me to her now."

"But this is impossible. Two hundred of the shah's executioners sit by the palace gates, bored to death by inactivity. They are just waiting to pounce on someone, and you want to go right up to the prison! You will land in the dungeon yourself."

"Shut up, you cowardly soul! Go to the prison and wait for me there. I will come shortly and give them all a shaking-up!.." Kara-Konchar whipped his steed and, kicking up a cloud of dust, dashed off down the narrow street.

He came to the part of town where the various craftsmen lived and worked; blacksmiths, coppersmiths, armorers and masters skilled in manufacturing mail, armor and shields. The pounding of countless hammers on anvils filled the air with a deafening, thunderous ringing.

And the work here was not moving at full-swing; only those craftsmen manufacturing weapons were busy. For who on doomsday needed carved copper bowls, pitchers or fine decorations for a horse's bridle?

Kara-Konchar caught sight of a crowd of smiths shouting and arguing. The appearance of the sullen horseman roused their curiosity and they all fell silent. What did this black horseman on the black stallion want?

Kara-Konchar rode into the center of the crowd and said hotly, "Hey you, smiths — hands of iron, chests of bronze! How long will you allow these khans and beks to make fools of you? First the Khorezm Shah Muhammad drained all your strength with requisitions. He fled to Persia with trunks full of gold. To our great fortune, his mother, the mean hyena, went trudging after him. Now

the self-styled Sultan Humar-Tegin has gone over to the enemy camp and probably already told them from which side it is easiest to destroy the walls of Gurganj. Are you simply going to stand around batting your eyes and waiting for some new sultan to betray you again? What are you waiting for? Let us go to the palace and tear to bits that nest of vipers, break down the iron door of the prison and free the prisoners from its dungeons. It is not bandits and murderers who are kept there, but those who spoke the truth, which was not to the sultan's liking."

"Let's go, let's go! We shall demolish the palace of the Khorezm Shah!" cried the smiths. "We shall destroy the prison!"

"Take your hammers, take your pincers and chisels, take everything you need to break the chains. Take everything you need to free our dying brothers from the dungeon."

All the smiths and armorers and other craftsmen, taking up their hammers and swords and spears, headed for the palace in a menacing throng.

A few of the shah's executioners started toward them and tried to break up the mob. They were beaten up and trampled underfoot. While the smiths were ravaging the palace, several men helped Kara-Konchar open the iron door of the prison. The guard Nazar-bobo, bound, stood nearby; he sobbed and swore that he had always looked after the prisoners like he would after his own children.

The smiths had the iron door open in no time.

Tugan, who had come running up with the smiths, cried, "Down into the dungeon, quick! My friends are still there, weak and blinded by the eternal darkness. Some of them will not be able to get out; their legs can no longer support them..."

Several men descended into the dark opening of the dungeon.

Soon the captives began creeping out. They clung to one another, dirty, in rags, their fingernails long and filthy, their hair matted. Blinded by many years of darkness, they bumped into one another, feeling their way with their hands, crying and laughing, unable to believe that they were once again beneath the sky and sun, among free people.

"Go through the bazaar," people shouted to them

from the crowd. "Let everyone see how the Khorezm shahs kept their subjects! Demand of the merchants clean shirts and pants."

With a flaming torch Kara-Konchar stepped inside the tower. The air was cold and damp. He pushed the terrified guard, who was chanting prayers, ahead of him. They climbed up the rickety stairs. Tugan followed them, breaking the locks on the prisoners' doors as he went. Women in rags, pitifully thin and wasted, came out, swaying and clinging to the walls, and started down the stairs, sobbing.

When Kara-Konchar had reached the vault of the roof, the guard stopped before an iron door. A small square opening in the door was covered by bars.

"Here," said the guard, "one woman from the palace harem is being kept 'forever and unto death'. She dared raise a hand against Shah Muhammad himself."

"What are you waiting for? Open it!"

"Do not be angry at me, bravest of warriors, but the padishah alone keeps the key to this door."

"You mean you have no key?"

"No, my master! No, Almighty Allah!"

"Then go to the devil!" And Kara-Konchar gave the guard a shove. Down he plummeted with a desperate wail, smashing against the rotted beams as he fell, and vanished into the darkness to the howls and barking of dogs.

Kara-Konchar put his eye to the small opening in the door. He saw only a scrap of an old rug lit up by a slanted ray of sunlight.

"Where is she?" he wondered. "The cell is empty. Can it be that she has died?"

Suddenly a shadow passed before him and a dark face appeared. Large black eyes stared fixedly through the opening.

Kara-Konchar had long ago prepared many fine words from old songs, but they all flew out of his head like frightened bees. He could only say, "It is I!"

A timid, weak voice whispered, "Put the light to your face, that I might recognize you."

Kara-Konchar stepped back and held up the burning torch.

"I recognize the scar across your face from the beast's

paw. It is you, whom nothing and no one can restrain."

"Move away from the door, you shall soon be free."

Kara-Konchar saw the slender shadow of the emaciated girl step back and sink lightly to the scrap of rug. The sun's ray fell on the dark, almost naked body. It was barely covered by tatters of red fabric and a few strings of blue beads. The big black eyes stared, sullen and guarded.

"Allow me, Kara-Konchar," said one of his companions. "An armorer will sooner open the locks than the warrior Kara-Konchar."

The smith knocked the lock off with his hammer. The iron door gave way. Gyul-Jamal remained seated, covering herself with her hands.

"All my clothing has rotted. I cannot rise before you."

Kara-Konchar stepped back and said to the young smith, "Do not look at this woman. Toss her your cloak — I shall give you a new, silk one." He turned around and climbed the narrow, half-demolished staircase to the tower roof.

He saw billows of smoke all around; in whirlwinds of sparks and flames they soared up to the sky. The city was ablaze. Detachments of horsemen moved about in clouds of dust around the city walls. In the distance the white, seven-tailed banner of Juchi Khan flapped in the wind.

Gyul-Jamal came out onto the rooftop in a blue turban and a man's cloak, looking like a slender youth. Raising her curved brows in astonishment, she stared into the distance.

"What is happening in Gurganj? Who are those terrible people galloping about before the city walls?"

"War has come here too," Kara-Konchar replied. "The enemy has besieged Gurganj... Now you and I shall always fight side by side. The fire of war and the tears in your sorrowful eyes have brought us together."

"I have forgotten everything in this terrible tower and learned only to hate. I shall go with you everywhere like a ferocious tigress and not the carefree Gyul-Jamal I once was..."

But Kara-Konchar was no longer listening to her words. Shading his eyes with his hand, he peered through clouds of dust and smoke.

"What have those madmen done! Look: the great river

Jaihun has left its shores and is heading for us... It washes away houses – they crumble like children's toys... Look: tall poplars topple with a crack as if felled with an axe... Those thick-headed, merciless savages have destroyed the ancient dam that has held the flow of the mighty rushing river for a thousand years...¹ Now the river will demolish everything in its path; it will flood and destroy this whole populous city... Gyul-Jamal, we must run from this old tower at once: it will crumble under the pressure of the water and crush us..."

A large part of the city was already destroyed by the continual assaults of prisoners, driven by the Mongols. The inhabitants of Gurganj, however, continued to fight with desperate fury. The Mongols took quarter after quarter. Used to fighting on horseback in the open field, the Mongols moved with difficulty through the narrow streets, cluttered with the ruins of burned structures, but they went on advancing stubbornly, picking off defenders with their long arrows.

The fiercest fighters were the craftsmen of Gurganj; they knew that if captured, their fate was predetermined: the Mongols would send the strongest and most skilled back to their faraway land, while the rest, whom they could not use, would be killed.

Wives and girls fought on walls and rooftops alongside their fathers, husbands and brothers. And whenever any of them fell, pierced by an arrow, the women would fearlessly pile a wall of bricks and earth before the wounded man to protect him from the continuing onslaught of arrows.

The heroic defense of Gurganj made up one of the most incredible pages in the sorrowful tale of the downfall of the great Khorezm; other cities displayed for the most part blind faith in the Mongols, cowardliness and weakness, and therefore perished in disgrace. The Mongols lost many of their warriors at Gurganj, and the bones of the dead made up whole mounds that could be seen among the debris for many years to come.

When only three quarters had not been taken, the

¹"The Mongols destroyed the dam themselves, after which the water rushed in and flooded the entire city. Structures were demolished and water was everywhere." (*Ibn al-Athir*, 13th century.)

weary, wounded defenders of Gurganj decided to surrender and sent chosen persons to Khan Juchi to ask for mercy. Jenghiz Khan's son replied:

"What were you thinking about earlier? Why did you not submit when my troops were approaching the city? Now, when I have lost so many of my finest warriors, can I possibly not allow my men to satiate themselves with fury and plunder? You shall know no mercy."

The Mongols rushed into the part of the city that was still standing. They took some of the defenders prisoner, others they killed, and they carried off everything there was to be had.

On the order of Khan Jagatai, who did not want his older brother to have the pearl of Khorezm, Gurganj, the Mongols destroyed the main dam, which distributed water throughout all of Khorezm. The water flooded the huge city and swept away its structures. The site of the city remained inundated for many years to come. He who survived the Tatars was either drowned in the flood or crushed beneath ruins. Only a few structures survived: part of the old palace Keshki-Akhchak, built of brick, and two tombs of the shahs.

The waters of the swollen river even flooded a few other cities of Khorezm, while the river itself changed its course and for a long time crossed the desert to the Abes-kun Sea.

During the desperate fight for Gurganj Haji Rakhim was on the walls among the fighters. Trained in Arabic methods of dressing and treating wounds, he aided the victims.

When the river Jaihun suddenly flooded the city, he sat for two days on top of the tall brick mausoleum of Shah Tekesh. In a boat sailing by, the dervish spotted his acquaintance, Kerim-Gulem the blacksmith. The smith took him aboard his boat and together they sailed across the surging waters, saving everyone they could. They were never to meet up with Kara-Konchar and Gyul-Jamal again. Haji Rakhim later heard on several occasions the tale of the *maddakh*¹ about the feats of Kara-Konchar, hunting for Mongols in the Kara-Kum, and

¹*Maddakh* — a story-teller.

of his boundless love for the shepherd girl Gyul-Jamal, taken by force to the harem of Khorezm Shah Muhammad.

The maddakh would end his tale with a description of the flood that washed away wealthy and renowned Gurganj. Kara-Konchar, he said, was swept up by the raging waters. Some people saw how he fought desperately with the waves in order to save Gyul-Jamal, but both of them disappeared in the stormy rapids... On a high place that appeared in the waters, two bodies were found: Gyul-Jamal and Kara-Konchar lay near each other, and the Turkmen girl's small hand was clasped in the mighty fist of Kara-Konchar...

The maddakh would conclude his tale with a precept: "Love founded on true attraction is a love that knows no end other than death..."¹ But if the maidens began to cry, the maddakh would say: "Knowledgeable people have told me another version as well. They say the tidings of Kara-Konchar's death in the waves of the Jaihun are not true — he swam out of the river on his black stallion and saved Gyul-Jamal. He took her away to the far reaches of the Kara-Kum, to his yurt near the wells at Bala-Ishem. There they lived happily for many years, which is what I wish for you too!"

Chapter Ten

HAJI RAKHIM AND THE YOUNG BATU KHAN

Hold not in contempt a weak youngling; it just
might be the youngling of a lion.

An Arab saying

It was with great difficulty that Haji Rakhim made his way through the warring Mongol troops and reached the camp of Juchi Khan. The golden paitza with the falcon, tied around the dervish's head, protected him and led him to the white yurt of the ruler of the north-western territory, the great kingdom of the Mongols. Haji Rakhim

¹From the precepts of Ibn-Hazm (10th century).

had heard that Juchi Khan, the eldest son of the terrible Jenghiz Khan, was the only person out of all those who surrounded the Mongol sovereign who dared to argue with him. But it was also said that Jenghiz Khan did not trust his first-born and constantly suspected him of trying to plot against him. Therefore Jenghis Khan appointed him ruler of the farthest, most remote region, where the greater part of the lands had yet to be conquered. Jenghiz Khan had said to his son at the time, "I give you all the lands to the west as far as the hoof of a Mongol steed can reach!"

Inside the white yurt, on a low throne, sat Juchi Khan, his legs tucked up under him. He resembled his father in his height, his bear-like manners and the cold look of his greenish eyes. His long moustache and slender black beard set him apart from the beardless Mongols. The horse hair skillfully woven into his beard ended in a thin braid which Juchi tucked behind his right ear. A crowd of supplicants, on bended knee and bowing to the ground before the throne, humbly awaited grace from the great sovereign: khans, ulems, merchants and ordinary citizens of Khorezm.

Loudly repeating, "Ya-gu-u, ya-hak!" and stepping over the backs of the supplicants, Haji Rakhim walked right up to Juchi Khan's throne and stopped, leaning on his staff.

Juchi Khan stared at him with a fixed, sullen gaze and asked, "What are you asking for, Kipchak shaman?"

Haji Rakhim explained that he had brought a handwritten letter from the grand vizier Mahmud-Yalvach.

"Why so late? I have been awaiting this letter for a long time."

"I was detained in the besieged city of Gurganj."

"Ah, so you were in cahoots with my enemies?"

"Yes, I helped the wounded as a doctor."

Haji Rakhim opened the end of the staff, sealed with wax, and pulled out a paper scroll with a red seal. Juchi Khan's scribe unrolled the paper and stared at it with astonishment.

"But three words are written here: 'Trust this man!' "

"Explicit and sufficient!" said Juchi. "Bring in my son Batu Khan!"

The nukers dashed off and returned shortly. Before

them a boy of about nine came skipping in with a bow and three red arrows.¹ He wriggled free of the two old men who were trying to lead him by the hands and ran up to Juchi Khan. The boy fell to his knees in a familiar motion, touched his forehead to the rug and jumped up again, gazing at everyone with flashing brown eyes.

"This is my son, Batu Khan!" Juchi said, looking askance at the boy. "I asked the faithful Mahmud-Yalvach to send me a learned mirza who would teach my son to read, write and speak the language in which my new subjects, the inhabitants of Khorezm, communicate. Will you prove a capable teacher?"

"I can teach the boy to read books in Turkmen, Persian and Arabic and will do so with pleasure," replied Haji Rakhim. "Only I am unable to explain the holy books as do the imams in the mosques. I study from those books which describe travels through the universe and which explain good and evil, love for one's home land and the duty of every man..."

"This is useful and good!" said Juchi. "Such a teacher will help skin from my son the hide of a desert savage and make him a ruler of peoples. Batu, behave your new teacher. And to you, mirza, I give permission to whip my son with a switch..."

The boy turned away.

"If he tells me about warriors and battles, I suppose I shall listen to him!"

Haji Rakhim answered the boy, "I shall tell you about the conquests of the Roman commander Iskender the Great. At a very early age this king conquered many countries whose kings had more weapons and treasures and troops than he..."

The boy turned to the dervish and surveyed him with curiosity.

"How did Khan Iskender achieve such victories?" asked Juchi Khan.

"They say that when Iskender himself was asked this, he replied, 'I did not oppress the subjects of any country I conquered.'"

Juchi Khan looked at his son and said, "My father, the great and inimitable Jenghiz Khan, has conquered half

¹Three red arrows — a sign of high birth.

the universe, and Iskender the Great the other half. What is left for you to conquer, Batu Khan?"

Without a second's hesitation the boy replied, "I shall take all the lands away from Iskender!"

From that day on Haji Rakhim remained in the camp of Juchi Khan, having been made the teacher of his son Batu. He tutored him for several years, until the sudden death of Juchi Khan at the hands of hired assassins. Once during a battle Juchi Khan raced off in pursuit of a deer and got separated from his nukers in the reeds. They found him with great difficulty. He lay with a broken spine, in customary Mongol fashion. The mysterious assassins disappeared and were never discovered. Some people whispered that they had been sent by Jenghiz Khan himself.¹ Juchi was still alive, but could not utter a word or move a hand. Only his eyes stared, sorrowful and sullen, until they closed forever.

At that time the renowned commander Sabutai Bahadar returned from a campaign in the west. He sat Batu Khan in his saddle with him and said, "Here the same end that my master Juchi Khan saw awaits you too. You shall go with me to China, where you will learn military skills. I shall raise you like my own son; I shall make a commander of you."

Having parted with Batu Khan, Haji Rakhim became a lone wanderer once again. He grieved terribly over his younger brother Tugan, who had disappeared in Gurganj during the flood. Had Tugan been killed or had he escaped the river's rapids and the Mongols' swords? This question perpetually occupied Haji Rakhim's thoughts, and he longed for the day when they would meet again.

Haji Rakhim wandered from town to town, asking eye-witnesses everywhere about the tragic days suffered by the peoples of Khorezm during the invasion of the merciless Mongols. He recorded the stories of trustworthy people and ultimately decided to write a whole book about Jenghiz Khan, about how he had become a mighty leader and wanted to conquer the whole world, and about how everything in the Mongols' wake died and turned to desert.

¹Certain Eastern chronicles write of this: Juveini (13th century) and others.

Part Three

THE BATTLE AT THE KALKA

Chapter One

JENGHIZ KHAN'S ORDER

...Their appearance was diabolical and incited horror. They had not beards; only some had a few hairs on their lips and chins. Their eyes were narrow and shifty, their voices shrill and sharp. Their stature was strong and endurable.

Kirakos, Armenian historian, 13th century

In spring of the Year of the Dragon, in the month of Safar (April), Jenghiz Khan summoned two commanders tested in the accomplishment of the most difficult assignments: the old one-eyed Sabutai Bahadar and the young Chepe Noyon.¹

They came at once to the silk yurt of the "terror of the universe" and fell prostrate on the mat before the gold throne. Jenghiz Khan was sitting on his left foot, hugging his right knee. Silver-fox tails hung from his emerald-studded lacquer hat. His yellow-green feline eyes stared impassionately at the two invincible warriors bowed before him. The "great and inimitable" began speaking in a low hoarse voice:

"My spies have informed me that the son of the yellow-eared mongrel, Khorezm Shah Muhammad, secretly left his army. Covering his tracks, Muhammad appeared recently at the crossing of the river Jaihun. He is taking with him countless riches, collected over the course of one hundred years by the shahs of Khorezm. He must be captured before he gathers another large army... We give you twenty thousand men. If the shah's army proves to be such that you have doubts about your victory, refrain from battle... But inform me at once!..

¹At that time, Jenghiz Khan, having captured Bukhara and Samarkand, was preparing a campaign to India.

Then I shall send Tohuchar Noyon, and alone he will succeed where the two of you together cannot... We think, however, that our order is stronger than all Muhammad's troops. Do not come back here to me unless you come dragging Muhammad in chains!.. If the shah, once he has been crushed by you, flees with a handful of companions to seek refuge among high mountains or within dark caverns, or, like a sly magician, disappears before men's eyes, then sweep through his lands like a black hurricane... Show condescension to any city that demonstrates obedience and leave there a small guard detachment and a ruler who has forgotten how to smile... But take by assault any town that shows resistance! Raze it to the ground, turn everything to ashes and dust!.. We think our wishes will not prove difficult for you to fulfill..."

Chepe Noyon straightened and asked, "If the Shah of Khorezm Muhammad will in some miraculous way flee from us ever farther to the west, how long shall we pursue him and stray from your golden yurt?"

"You shall pursue him to the end of the universe, until you approach the Last Sea."

Sabutai Bahadar, hunched and twisted, raised his head with a groan and rasped, "And if Shah Muhammad turns into a fish and disappears in the bottomless sea?"

Jenghiz Khan scratched the bridge of his nose and cast a distrustful glance at Sabutai.

"Seize him before he does! We grant you permission to depart."

The two commanders got to their feet and backed to the door.

That very day they raced west with twenty thousand Mongol horsemen.

Chapter Two

THE REPORT TO HIS MAJESTY

Carrying out the order of Jenghiz Khan, his commanders Chepe Noyon and Sabutai Bahadar and two tens of horsemen roamed the valleys and mountainous thickets of northern Persia for two years searching for the

trail of the sovereign of Khorezm, Shah Muhammad. They did not find him. But rumors reached them that the Khorezm Shah, having first abandoned his homeland and then himself been abandoned by all, had died on a lone island in the Abeskun Sea.

Then Chepe and Sabutai summoned a Mongol who could sing ancient songs about the battles of brave men and slowly sang him their report to the "great and inimitable". They made the Mongol repeat their words nine times¹ and then dispatched him to Jenghiz Khan at his camp in a valley near the city of Nessef², rich in lush meadows and clean waters. Because the journey along roads was still dangerous due to attacks and robberies by hungry bands of refugees who had left the towns incinerated by the Mongols, three hundred trustworthy nukers were sent to guard the messenger.

The whole way the messenger sang old songs about the blue Mongol steppes, the wooded mountains, the maidens of the Kerulen who were like the scarlet flame of fires, but never did he sing the message sent by the two commanders. Having arrived at the camp of the great kagan, passed eight outposts of bodyguards and been cleansed by the smoke of holy fires, the messenger approached the yellow tent and stopped before the golden door. On either side of the entrance stood two steeds of fabulous beauty: one was milky white, the other sorrel, and both were tied by white horsehair tethers to golden stakes.

Awed by such riches, the Mongol messenger fell flat on his face and remained that way until two hefty bodyguards lifted him and dragged him into the yurt, dumping him on the rug before Jenghiz Khan. The Mongol sovereign sat on a wide, gold-plated throne, his legs tucked up under him.

On his knees, eyes shut, the messenger took to singing the memorized report, breaking into the high voice in which he was accustomed to singing Mongol ballads:

¹Illiterate Mongol leaders wishing to send an important message and fearing that the messenger would distort it, used to compose it in the form of a song which the messenger would learn by heart. The Mongols considered the number nine holy.

²Nessef — the present-day town of Karshi to the south of Bukhara.

beard and scratched the sole of his bare foot. He stared wearily at the messenger lying before him and said as if in contemplation:

"You have a throat like that of a wild goose... You ought to be rewarded..." He dug into a yellow silk pouch hanging on the arm of his throne, took out a dusty lump of sugar and stuffed it into the messenger's trembling mouth. Then the kagan said, "It is still early to praise Chepe Noyon and Sabutai Bahadar. We shall see if their campaign ends successfully... Our reply will be sent with a special messenger."

The kagan dismissed the messenger with a motion of his finger. He ordered the servants to give him his fill of food and koumiss, and to feed his escorting guard generously as well. The next day he sent them back to overtake the Mongol detachment, already far away.

A year passed and no news came of the Mongols who had gone to the west. Once Jenghiz Khan dictated a few words to his secretary, the Uigur Ismail-Khoja, and ordered the sealed letter (no one knew its content) delivered by a messenger hung with bells, with falcon feathers in his hat (a sign of urgency). He appointed the Kohuchar Noyon and a tumen of ten thousand soldiers to guard the messenger.

"You shall go to the end of the universe until you have found Chepe Noyon and Sabutai Bahadar. There, before your eyes, the messenger must hand the letter to Sabutai Bahadar in person. They have gone so far now that they are surrounded by thirty-three outraged peoples. It is time to come to their rescue."

That very day Tohuchar set out to the west with his detachment to seek out the Mongols who had raced to the edge of the universe.

Chapter Three

IN SEARCH OF THE LAST SEA

Onward, onward, you sure-footed steeds! Nations
tremble in fear your mere shadow instills...

From a Mongol song

Like two giant black snakes who, having slept through the winter, creep out from beneath the roots of the old

plane tree into the glade and, having warmed themselves in the rays of the spring sun, slither along trails, first together then apart, inciting horror in the fleeing beasts and crying birds circling overhead — so did the two Mongol tumens of the daring Chepe Noyon and cautious, clever Sabutai Bahadar, first stretching out in long trains, then crowding together in a noisy and colorful throng of horses, trample the fields around horror-stricken cities, heading west, leaving behind charred ruins and scorched, bloated corpses.

These advance troops of Jenghiz Khan's army marched through northern Persia, sacking the cities of Khur, Samnan, Qum, Zenjan and others. The Mongols spared only the wealthy city of Khamadan, whose ruler dispatched an honorary delegation to greet them with gifts: a herd of riding horses and two hundred camels loaded down with garments. The Mongols sustained a stubborn battle in Kazvin, where the inhabitants fought desperately inside the city with long knives. Kazvin was burned to the ground.

The Mongols passed the cold winter months in the city of Rey.¹ From all directions they received herds of sheep, the finest horses and camels with packs full of clothing. Here the Mongols waited for spring to come.

When the slopes of the Persian mountains began to turn green beneath the spring sun, the Mongols moved across Azerbaijan. The great wealthy city of Tabriz sent them valuable gifts, and the Mongols, agreeing to peace, passed by without touching the city. They headed for the Caucasus, where they advanced on the capital of Arran, Gandja. But the Mongols did not storm this city, demanding instead silver and clothing, which was delivered, and they continued on their way to Georgia.

The powerful Georgian army stood in their path. Sabutai moved ahead with the main forces. Chepe hid in ambush with five thousand horsemen. After the very first skirmish, the Mongols retreated in feigned flight. The Georgians, abandoning their caution, raced after them. Chepe's Tatars, lying in ambush, charged the Georgians from behind, and Sabutai's men, turning around, surrounded the Georgians from all sides and slaughtered them. Thirteen thousand Georgians were killed in this battle.

¹Rey — a city that once stood near present-day Teheran.

The Mongol army was reluctant, however, to venture deep into that land furrowed by mountainous canyons and populated by belligerent nations, so they left it, loaded down with loot. The warriors said that there was not space enough for them in the mountainous canyons of the Caucasus. They sought the steppes, where their horses might graze freely. Having massacred the town of Shemakha, the Mongols advanced toward the Shirvan city of Derbent. This fortress stands on an inaccessible mount and blocks the passage to the north. Chepe Noyon sent a messenger to the Shirvan Shah, Rashid, who was holding out in the fortress, with the following demand:

“Send me your distinguished beks that you and I might reach a peaceful agreement.”

The Shirvan ruler sent ten elders of high birth. Chepe slayed one proud bek before the others' very eyes and demanded, “Provide us with reliable escorts so that our army might pass through the mountains. Then your lives will be spared. But if the escorts do not prove conscientious, you will all meet the same end.”

The Shirvan beks replied that they would concede to this demand, led the Mongol army along the mountain trails, bypassing Derbent, and showed them the way to the Kipchak plains. Then the Mongols set the old mediators free and headed on north on their own.

Chapter Four

IN THE LAND OF ALANS AND KIPCHAKS

In the North Caucasus Chepe and Sabutai reached the land of the Alans¹ where many Lezgins, Circassians and Kipchak detachments had come from the vast northern steppes to the aid of the Alans.

The Mongols fought them for an entire day until nightfall, but the forces remained equal, neither side gaining the victory.

Then Chepe sent a scout to the distinguished Kipchak Khan, Kotyan, and the scout read him the following letter:

“We Tatars and you Kipchaks are of one blood, of the

¹*Alans*. — ancestors of the present-day Ossets.

same race. But you unite with foreigners against your brothers. The Alans are alien to us and you alike. Let us make an indestructible pact not to disturb one another. In payment we shall give you as much gold and fine clothing as you like. You go away from here and leave us to take care of the Alans on our own."

The Mongols sent the Kipchaks many horses loaded down with valuable gifts, and the Kipchak khans, succumbing to the temptation, treacherously abandoned the Alans in the night and led their troops away to the north.

The Mongol troops attacked the Alans and ravaged their villages, burning everything to the ground, looting and killing. The Alans proclaimed their total submission to Jenghiz Khan, and many joined the Mongol troops.

Rid of the Alans' sharp swords at their backs, Chepe and Sabutai turned their warriors suddenly to the north, to the Kipchak pasture lands. Convinced of their own safety, the Kipchak khans dispersed to their camps with their detachments. The Mongols destroyed their principal nomad camps and pillaged all kinds of property, many times more than what they had given in payment for the Kipchaks' desertion.

Those Kipchaks who lived far out in the steppe, getting word of the Mongol invasion, loaded their belongings onto their camels and fled: some to the marshes, others to the forests¹. Many retreated as far as the Russian and Hungarian lands.

The Mongols pursued the fleeing Kipchaks along the banks of the Don until they had chased them all the way to the blue waters of the Khazar Sea² and many were drowned there. They took the surviving Kipchaks with them as horse tenders and herders to watch over the livestock and horses seized along the way.

Then they advanced on Khazaria and attacked Sudak, a rich coastal Kipchak city. At one time many foreign ships with clothes, fabrics and other goods had called at

¹In the upper reaches of the rivers Kalmius and Samar (tributary of the Dnieper) there were dense forests, marshes and a portage across which boats were hauled. These two rivers once comprised a major trade route from the Azov Sea to the Dnieper.

²In the thirteenth century Muslim writers referred to the Black Sea as the Khazar Sea, the Crimea as Khazaria. Later the Caspian Sea was called the Khazar Sea.

its port. The Kipchaks would trade for them slaves, silver foxes and squirrels, as well as the cow hides for which the Kipchak land was famed.

Having learned of the Mongols' approach, the inhabitants of Sudak fled; part took refuge in the mountains, part boarded ships and sailed across the sea to Trebizond. Chepe and Sabutai plundered the city and returned once again to the north to rest in the Kipchak pasture lands, where they stayed for more than a year.

Here stretched meadows rich in grass and fertile fields ploughed by slaves; they were covered by watermelon and pumpkin patches, and burgeoning herds of fat cows and thin-fleeced sheep grazed in these pasture lands. The Mongol warriors praised these steppes and said that their horses were as free here as back in their homeland on the banks of the Onon and Kerulen. But their own Mongol steppes were dearer, and they would exchange them for no others. Once they had finished conquering the universe, all the Mongols wanted but one thing — to return to the banks of the Kerulen.

Chepe and Sabutai stayed with their men for a short time in the Kipchaks' principal city of Sharukan¹. It had stone structures half buried underground, and warehouses with stores of foreign goods, but the item found in greatest abundance was portable yurts used by both Kipchak khans and simple nomads alike. In the spring they would leave the city for the steppe and return to the city again for the winter.

With the coming of the Mongols the foreign merchants, fearing war, stopped trading with the steppe inhabitants. The city of Sharukan, plundered and burned, was vacated, and the Mongol troops left for Lukomorje.²

There the Mongols placed their kuriens in the lowlands between the hills to protect themselves from the winds. Each kurien comprised a ring of several hundred yurts confiscated from the Kipchaks, and housed a thousand warriors. At the center of every ring stood the commander's large yurt with a *bunchuk*, his symbol of power, a tall, pointed staff hung with horse tails. Saddled horses

¹According to a number of scholars, the Kipchak city of Sharukan, i. e., Sharuk-akhana, was on the site of present-day Kharkov, which explains the origin of the name.

²*Lukomorje* — the coast of the Sea of Azov.

with tightly drawn reins stood tethered to iron spikes near the yurts, always ready to march, while the remaining horses grazed in enormous herds in the steppe under the watch of the Kipchak grooms.

The Mongol troop continued to observe the strict laws of Jenghiz Khan's *Yasa*¹. Their camps were encircled by three rings of sentries. Sentry outposts were hidden in the steppe along the main paths leading to the lands of the Bulgars, Uruses, and Ugrs². They stopped everyone who rode through the steppe, questioned them, then sent those who knew anything about the neighboring tribes on to Chepe Noyon, and slew the rest.

Many of the nukers had with them in their yurts their Mongol wives, who had been with them throughout the campaign, as well as women and children seized en route. The Mongol women were dressed just as were the men, and it was difficult to tell them apart at first glance. Occasionally they participated in battles, but generally the women were in charge of the camels, the pack horses and the wagon trains, where they guarded the divided-up booty. The women also looked after the prisoners, who bore their owner's brand on their thighs, and assigned them various tasks. Along with the prisoners they milked the mares, cows and she-camels, and cooked food in copper or stone pots during stops.

The small children born during the campaign or captured en route would ride in carts or in leather saddlebags on pack horses, sometimes two in each, or they would be secured to the backs of the Mongol women traveling on horseback.

In the steppe, a ways from the Mongol camp, stretched an encampment of warriors of various tribes who had joined the Mongols en route. Here one could see colorful Turkmen yurts, red Tangut tents, the black tents of the Boluchis and the simple lean-tos of the Alans or the horsemen of some other unknown tribe. This entire random horde, driven by the Mongols, was sent first in an assault, and after the battle it picked through the remains of the loot seized by the Mongols.

¹*Yasa* or *Yasak* — a collection of Jenghiz Khan's decrees and sayings that long served as the Mongols' code of laws. The *Yasa* is now totally forgotten and only insignificant excerpts of it have survived.

²*Ugrs* — Hungarians.

Chapter Five

IN THE TATAR CAMP BY THE KALKA

Sabutai Bahadar ordered a yurt set up for himself on a high mountain ridge by the seashore, near the mouth of a slow, muddy river.

The nukers were glad to carry out their commander's order, sensing that rest was at hand. Twelve camels brought several portable yurts. Frightened Kipchak woman prisoners in pointed felt hats rode on the camels. At the demand of the Mongols they sang songs while they erected the semicircular frames, covered them with white felt and tied them down with a criss-cross of colorful cloth strips.

Sabutai asked glumly, "Why three yurts?"

"In one you shall think your thoughts, the second will house your favorite hunting leopards, and the third is essential — in it we are holding for you the finest Kipchak women, able to sing and dance."

Sabutai cut the nukers short.

"No! Let the leopards snarl in the second yurt, but in the third yurt, let old Saklab cook my meals for me. I do not want these Kipchak women distracting me during a campaign. Distribute them among the commanders."

Saklab moved into the third yurt with his kettles, large wooden ladles and a long slender knife in his sash. The tall, lean, bony slave with grey dishevelled hair had been seized by the Tatars near Astrabad. The nukers had explained to Sabutai at the time, "This captive old man is an Urus by birth. He was the cook of Khorezm Shah Muhammad's own mirza and decided to flee back to his homeland. He speaks all languages and can prepare many different dishes. The old man will make you pilaf with almonds, and chilaff with plums, and kaime from peas, and kaimak from cream, and halva and pakhlava. With him is his foster child, a quiet youth by the name of Tugan. He will help Saklab prepare you food."

Sabutai grew angry and said, "I do not require more than one man to prepare my meals for me. Old Saklab alone will suffice. Everyone likes to be a helper by the kettle. Arm this youth Tugan with a sword and give him a bare, mangy horse. Put him in the advance guard and let him learn military affairs. If he makes a good warrior he

will soon have a fine horse, a saddle and armor. And if he is a bad warrior he will be killed in the first engagement. The loss will not be great!..”

In a white-capped yurt, its door facing south, toward the sea, Sabutai sat near the entrance on a saddle pillow. He stared at length with his one bulging eye in wonder at the turbulent grey sea, where everything — the water, the wind, the fish and even the birds flying above the waves — was different from those at the blue lakes of the Mongol steppe. Waves rolled toward the shore in monotonous succession, and the white sails of foreign ships occasionally appeared in the bluish haze — they were afraid to approach the land occupied by the Tatars.

Here was a vast steppe, tall grass and small lakes with water fowl. Livestock taken from the Kipchaks grazed all around: the bulls were white and long-horned, the sheep were fat, heavy-tailed and also white; and the Kipchaks' felt mats and yurts were white too. Sabutai's men ate meat every day and, with nothing to do, lazed around on Persian rugs. Sometimes the Mongol khans, leaders of thousands, would go off hunting with falcons, or they would hold races, testing the horses — their own Mongol ones as well as those seized along their way of Turkmen, Persian and Caucasian breeds.

Upstream on the Kalka, the second commander Chepe Noyon erected his yurt amid the steppe on a barrow. A green plain spread out all around him. Across it to the north stretched a chain of guard barrows.

Although Chepe and Sabutai had been sent west by Jenghiz Khan at the same time and for the same task, the two commanders were frequently at odds, argued constantly, and each tried to point out the other's error. It was not without sly intentions that Jenghiz Khan had sent two rivals. He did so on numerous occasions with other of his nukers, dispatching two men on one campaign — for rivals will always try to outdo each other.

Chepe, impetuous in battle, was forever plunging ahead. His detachment had landed itself in the most dangerous of predicaments on more than one occasion. He demonstrated skill in slipping away from a pressing enemy. When death threatened from all sides Sabutai would come to his rescue. He would attack the enemy with the cohesive ranks of his heavy Mongol cavalry, in which both the

nukers and the horses were covered with Chinese armor.

Tall, straight, never laughing Chepe with his motionless glassy eyes would come to Sabutai after the battle, covered with dust and spattered with blood. Sitting by the fire he would explain to Sabutai that he had not made any mistakes, that he had been outnumbered by enemy forces. And Sabutai would laugh, pleased that he had been Chepe's savior once again, and suggest that rather than explaining his mistakes he try this young lamb roasted on a skewer and stuffed with garlic and pistachios, the way it had been prepared for the Khorezm Shah himself.

Chepe was proud, self-confident, temperamental. He believed that because he was capable of piercing the head of a gopher in flight at sixty paces, he was immune to error. It was for his marksmanship and impetuosity that he had been given the nickname Chepe — "arrow".¹ Everyone in the army knew him by this name, though his true name was something else. He would always survey the area himself before a battle, dashing on a tall lean steed along the dangerous advance spots, and he was rescued from death by his bodyguards on more than one occasion.

Sabutai, with tufts of grey hair on his chin, appeared to be an old man; no one knew his actual age. At some time in his youth he had been wounded in the shoulder, the muscles had been severed, and the right arm had been withered ever since. He functioned with his left arm alone. He had also lost his left eye, which was always screwed up now, while the right bulged out and seemed to see through everyone.

All the nukers in the army said that Sabutai was as cunning and cautious as an old fox with a gnawed-off paw, and as fierce as a leopard who had been in a trap — no enemy was feared with Sabutai; with him his men felt safe.

Chepe stubbornly planned the route to take to reach the Last Sea, washing the shores of the universe. The report to

¹Chepe had been promoted from the ranks of ordinary nukers. "Because Chepe was a brave man, Jenghiz Khan put him in command of ten men; because he served well, he was made the bek of one hundred; because he displayed zeal and diligence he became the leader of a thousand. After this Jenghiz Khan gave him the 'bekship' of a tumen and he served in the retinue for a long time, marched with the army and performed great services." (*Rashid al-Din.*)

Jenghiz Khan sent with the singing messenger had been composed by Chepe, while Sabutai merely reassured him, shaking his head and laughing, "Will you get far? And will you soon reach the spot from which you, like a saiga, will fly back, and I will have to rescue you for the last time?"

The scouts who watched over the steppe would seize travelers and take them to Chepe. Chepe himself would question them about the tribes that lived to the west and the north, about how to reach them, about rivers and river crossings, about fodder for their horses, about wealthy cities and strong fortresses, about armies, weapons and whether or not the warriors could fight well and hit their target with arrows, and whether it was far to the East Sea.

Chapter Six

THE ROAMER PLOSKINYA FALLS PRISONER TO THE TATARS

One day the scouts brought to Chepe several people from a tribe they had never seen before. They were engaged in the transport of travelers by ferry and boat. They were tall, broad-shouldered and had thick red beards. They wore short, ragged sheepskins, leather trousers and soft, flat-soled boots laced with straps. Their grey lynx-fur caps were tilted jauntily over one ear.

"Who are you? Where have you come from?" asked Chepe.

One, taller and broader than the others, answered in the Kipchak tongue, "We call ourselves roamers, because we roam the steppe. Our fathers and grandfathers fled here to the steppe to escape the princes, in search of freedom..."

"If you did not show respect for your masters and ran from them, does this not make you bandits and vagrants?"

"We are not really bandits and not exactly vagrants... We are free people, free hunters and fishermen."

"And who are you?" Chepe asked the tallest roamer.

"I am called Ploskinya! Our roamers chose me as their leader."

Chepe immediately dispatched his nukers to Sabutai Bahadar with the message, "Come quickly! We have taken useful prisoners."

The nukers returned with these words, "Sabutai Baha-

dar is sitting on a rug. There is a sack of beans beside him. He said, 'I will not go, I am busy...' "

Chepe left the captive roamers under guard and set out with Ploskinya, surrounded by nukers, to see Sabutai.

The sharp silhouettes of Sabutai's yurts stood out against the fading purple sky. Chimneys of smoke curled above them and bunchuks with horses' tail and buffalo horns stood upright. Sabutai was sitting in his yurt on a Persian silk rug. Illuminated by the quivering light of the fire, he was taking beans from a colorful sack and painstakingly arranging them in stange long strings.

"Who is this?" asked Sabutai. For an instant he fixed his bulging eye on Ploskinya, then returned to his beans. "Sit down, Chepe Noyon."

Chepe lowered himself to the rug near Sabutai and impassively watched the warrior's activities out of the corner of his eye. He could never guess what this old leopard with the gnawed-off paw was going to do next.

The roamer Ploskinya, tall, stately, with a thick red beard tumbling down on his chest, surveyed the yurt with shifty eyes and weighed something in his mind. He went on standing respectfully by the entrance under the guard of two armed Mongols.

Glancing at Sabutai's hand swiftly arranging the beans, Chepe told him what he had heard from the prisoners, and suggested that they use Ploskinya as a guide.

"And what are the Kipchak khans doing now?" Sabutai cut him off.

"They all lost heart," Ploskinya replied. "When your Tatars charged on their city Sharukan, the Kipchak khans fled in all directions — some to the Russian borders, others to the swamps."

"Who fled to the Uruses?"

"Many fled — their wealthiest man Kotyan, and the Lukomorye Kipchaks and the Toksebich and Bagubarsov and the Basteyev clans, and others."

Sabutai looked up from his beans and fixed his gaze on Ploskinya.

"And where is the main army of Uruses now?"

"Who but God knows this?"

Sabutai squirmed, his face twisted, and his open eye lit up with wrath. He brandished a crooked finger with a gnawed nail.

"Say everything you know! Do not cover your tracks! Or else I will put you beneath a board and sit twenty nukers on it. Then you will make one last squeal and peg out."

"Why would I keep silent?"

"Tell me, where are the Urus princes now? Are the Uruses preparing for war or not?"

"Let me collect my thoughts!" said Ploskinya and, planting his long legs wide apart, rolled his eyes.

Sabutai twice cast a suspicious glance at the roamer and went back to arranging the beans.

Finally he hissed, "Listen you, vagrant of the steppe! If you tell me everything like it is, I shall reward you. Look here at these beans. See this string of beans? This is the river Don... And this long string is the Dnieper... Come closer and show me where the Urus city of Kiev would be."

Ploskinya took a step forward, but the two Mongol guards lunged at him and tore off his sash and sword. Then the roamer lowered himself cautiously to his knees and crawled toward Sabutai.

"There! I understand!" he said, furrowing his brow and pushing his fur hat back on his head. "This here is our Dnieper... And this is the mouth of the Dnieper at the sea, where Oleshye is... And this small river here — it is the Kalka, where we are now standing... Only listen, oh greatest khan! The Dnieper does not flow straight from north to south like this, but makes an angle like a bent arm. Here, where the shoulder is, stands Kiev; and where the fist is, lies the Black Sea. And here, where the elbow juts into the steppe, lies the island of Khortitsa in the Dnieper's waters; and here near Khortitsa, at the elbow that is, the Russian army is gathering." Ploskinya rearranged the beans so that the Dnieper formed an angle.

"How far is it from here to Kiev?" asked Sabutai. He took a handful of gold coins from his sack along with the beans, tossed them into the air and laid them at his side.

Ploskinya's eyes lit up, and he licked his dry lips.

"What do you need Kiev for? The Russians will not set out from Kiev. It is far away, some six hundred versts¹ —"

"What is a 'verst'?" Sabutai asked angrily. "I do not

¹A verst is 1.06 kilometers. — Tr.

understand 'verst'!.. Tell me how many days it is to Kiev on horseback."

"If you go from here to Kiev by one horse, you will ride straight ahead for twelve days. And if you have two horses, it will take six days."

"Ah, now you have begun to speak sense."

"But the Russians do not go straight into the steppe from Kiev. They sail down the Dnieper in boats, there to that corner, to the island of Khortitsa. There they cross to the opposite bank and take a short cut here to Lukomorye. At a steady pace it takes but three or four days to reach here, while with two horses you can make it in just two days."

"Just two days?" Sabutai asked in surprise. "The Uruses can arrive here from the Dnieper in two days?"

"You see, from here, from this bend, from Khortitsa, our Russians often made raids into the Kipchak nomad camps. If you travel without wagons it will take you two or three days."

Sabutai was apparently pleased at having received such important information. He chuckled, slapping his knee, and ordered koumiss served. He asked Ploskinya in detail about the roads, the fords across rivers, the Urus army, about what kind of horses they had, how their men were armed, and whether or not they fought well.

"They are tough fighters, especially with pole-axes and ordinary hatchets."

"How big is the Urus army?"

"If all the nearby princes lead their troops to Khortitsa — those of Kiev, Chernigov, Smolensk, Galich, Volyn and other smaller ones — it will make about fifty thousand archers, foot soldiers and horsemen."

"In other words, they have five tumens?" said Sabutai and placed five gold coins near the bend at Khortitsa on the Dnieper where the march into the steppe began. "And how many horsemen will the Kipchaks supply?"

"I suppose their numbers too will amount to about fifty thousand.¹ A countless horde of Kipchaks has already gathered on this side of the Dnieper."

¹Ploskinya intentionally exaggerated the number of Russian and Kipchak troops in order to frighten the Mongols. In reality, their numbers were significantly less. The chronicles do not give an exact figure.

Sabutai put down five more gold coins.

"So there will be but ten tumens of Uruses and Kipchaks against us?" Sabutai noted and glanced at the silent, impenetrable Chepe. "Remember, Chepe Noyon, the army with which we moved on Khorezm from the Black Irtysh?.. Now we'll show whether or not we are good pupils of the 'tremor of the universe' Jenghiz Khan!"

Crouched on all fours, Ploskinya glanced back and forth between the gold coins and the pensive Khans. Sly, malicious sparks flashed in Ploskinya's eyes when he asked ingratiatingly, "And why didn't you, oh great Tatar leader, put down a few more gold coins at the spot where your Tatar forces stand? Vaunt the numbers of your troops!"

Sabutai clenched his crooked fingers in a fist and thrust it into Ploskinya's face.

"That's the size of our Tatar army! And this is what I shall do with the Uruses and Kipchaks!.." Sabutai snatched up the gold coins and threw them into the sack with the beans. "I will stuff them all into my sack and devour them like curds."

Ploskinya backed away.

"Give me something from your khan's grace for my efforts!"

"No! I give money to no one; everyone brings it to me, and I send it to my lord Jenghiz Khan the invincible... However, you can earn a reward. Have you any sons?"

"Four, thank God."

"Where are they? Far away?"

"They are stationed at fords along the Don."

"I shall send one hundred horsemen to fetch them; they will have them here in no time. You shall order them to make their way as spies over to the side of the Uruses and scout out where the Urus forces are and how many there are. Have them find out what the Urus leaders are thinking, then return quickly to give me an exact report. Then I shall release both you and your sons and reward you with a herd of horses and a handful of gold each. Well, why do you hem and haw? What are you waiting for?"

Ploskinya stood firmly, his long legs planted wide apart. He sighed heavily and said, "Chop off my head, oh glorious khan, but do not touch my sons!"

Sabutai hissed and pounded his fist on the rug.

“How dare you speak to me this way! Hey, nukers! Take my honorable guest to the yurt with the leopards and station a triple guard there. Have Saklab feed him to his heart’s content, as he would a khan...”

“Shall we tie up his legs?” asked a nuker. “A wolf like that can run away!”

“Yes, do not forget to honor him with a heavy iron chain!..”

Chapter Seven

ALARM IN KIEV

Bar the gates to the plains
With your keen arrows,
Stand up for the Russian land,
Avenge the wounds of Igor,
Svyatoslav’s bold son!

For your brawls have brought the pagans
Into the Russian land,
Into Vseslav’s realm!
For your feuds have brought violence
From the Polovtsian land!

The Lay of Igor’s Host

On the low left bank of the Dnieper, opposite Kiev, a ferry had been seized by the Polovtsi, who had attacked suddenly. They climbed onto the ferry, threatened the boatmen, not allowing them to fleet. From the multitude of people the ferry tipped, drawing in water. The stout old khan of the Polovtsi rode up on a horse that was spotted like a leopard. He was accompanied by a hundred jigits. One of them pranced in the lead, bearing the khan’s bunchuk with horses’ tails and copper trinkets. Another thumped a tambourine. Two others tooted shrilly on pipes. One jigite on a wild, snorting steed cracked his whip, trying to clear a path to the ferry for the khan.

Off to one side, a lean dusty wanderer with a satchel on his back was telling a crowd of listeners that the Polovtsi were fleeing the Wild Field¹, pursued by an unknown, fearful-looking tribe of Tatars – “their faces

¹*The Wild Field* – the Black Sea steppes.

are beardless, their noses are flat, and each one has a touselled braid like a witch. People fall dead at the very sight of the Tatar infidels...”

“What kind of people are they? Tell us, God’s wanderer — it is clear you are an enlightened and learned man.”

Leaning on a long staff, the wanderer began:

“A vile people, unheard-of in our land, known as Tatars will come from the east in countless hordes, and with it will come a multitude of other nations. Until this time the Polovtsi have captured and killed surrounding tribes, but now the hour of death is upon them. The Tatars have not merely conquered the Polovtsi and driven them away, they have exterminated them all and settled on their lands...”

“Where has this tribe come from?”

“They are spoken of in the holy books, the bishop Methodius Patariisky testifies to how the Greek king Alexander the Great drove the defiled nation of Gog and Magog¹ to the ends of the earth. He enclosed them by mountains and ordered them to stay there until the end of time. And so it shall be, says the bishop Methodius, for at the end of time the mountains will move apart once again, and then the Gog and Magog will leave there and capture all the land from the east to the Euphrates, from the Tigris to the Black Sea — all the land except Ethiopia...”

“All the land!” resounded cries from the crowd of listeners. “This means our land too?..”

The wanderer went on:

“Do you not see what is happening all around? These are signs that the end of the world is at hand! A terrible star has appeared whose rays extend far to the east, which means a new death to Christians and the invasion of a new enemy... The vile Gog and Magog have come out from behind the mountains and are marching on us! The end of time that was foretold is upon us. The end of the world is near!..”

Sighs and laments sounded in the crowd. The wanderer removed his felt hat and the listeners dropped bread and small black coins in it.

¹*Gog and Magog* (Yajuji and Majuji in Muslim mythology) — two nations led by Satan in a climactic battle at Armageddon against the kingdom of God.

From the right bank the troops of the Grand Prince of Kiev sailed up in large caulked boats. They dispersed the crowd, cleared a spot on the ferry and helped the Polovtsian khan board it. In a crimson, sable-lined chekmen and a conical white cap studded with pearls, the khan stood grandly, holding the railing with a leather-gloved hand. His other hand gripped the hilt of a curved sabre, glittering with diamonds.

The khan, stout and majestic, appeared calm; only his eyes shifted nervously, looking askance at the dark waters of the Dnieper. The wind picked up, the surface of the river rippled, and white caps foamed on the rolling waves.

The khan paid generously. The ferrymen received quite a few handfuls of silver coins and they did their utmost. All day they transported the enormous caravan: choice horses in embroidered horse-cloths, camels screaming with fear, bulky buffaloes with long horns reaching down to their shoulders, and finely dressed foreign prisoners — swarthy, dark-browed girls adorned with beads and ribbons. All this was being transported as a gift to the Russian princes.

Word spread through the crowd that this was the eldest of Polovtsian khans, Kotyan, master of a hundred thousand horses who roamed the boundless plains of the Wild Field with his brand: a hoofprint and two lines.

“Kotyan is the master of the steppe! Alone he can put up an enormous army. He must have had good reason for coming to Kiev. Need drove him. And other Polovtsian khans have come with their clans over to the side of the Russians and are now crossing the Dnieper at every ford and bridge. The Polovtsian detachments ford the river on horseback, wearing armor and carrying spears... Is something going to happen? Could they have malicious intentions? The Polovtsi no longer sing merry songs. Only slow songs, like camels’ groans, can be heard from afar as they move from the steppe in our direction...”

In the quarters of the Grand Prince of Kiev, Mstislav Romanovich¹, hasty preparations were being made for the convention: both great and small princes were expected.

¹Mstislav Romanovich — the last Kievan prince (1214-1223) from the line of Monomakhs, descendants of the Grand Prince of Kiev Vladimir Monomakh (1053-1125).

Messengers on swift horses had been sent to summon all to the defense of the Russian land.

It was not easy for the Prince of Kiev to receive honorably the distinguished guests — each showed up with his detachment; the higher up the prince, the greater his retinue. The prince's servants had the bakers and butchers of Kiev make filled pies and round loaves of bread and bring them to the prince's court. He no longer had the power possessed by the Prince of Kiev one hundred years before, in the times of Monomakh. Back then nearly all the Russian lands had been in the hands of the Grand Prince of Kiev: Kiev and Pereyaslavl and Smolensk and Suzdal and Rostov, and even faraway Novgorod had all belonged to him. Back then all the princes obeyed him, and the Polovtsi did not dare lift a finger. He had spread the glory of the Russian name far and wide. But years passed and the line of Monomakh crumbled. Princes distributed towns and rural districts among their sons, nephews and grandsons, and now Mstislav Romanovich ruled a Kiev that was diminished and weak. In the past twenty-five years, the havoc wreaked by the Russian princes had devastated Kiev, when troops from Galich and Vladimir and Suzdal, and the savage Polovtsi brought in by double-dealing princes¹ plundered and burned the ancient capital.

It was not easy for the Kievans to reconstruct their capital city after so many routs; many buildings stood in ruins, without doors and windows...

Now misfortune was once again approaching from the steppe. It gathered together irreconcilable rivals, proud and obstinate princes who had spent their lives fighting over the best throne, the wealthier city, the more populous district. Now their age-old enemies, the Polovtsi, had come running to Kiev with bowed heads, seeking assistance. Sullen and downcast, they sat in a bunch on the ground before the gates of the prince's court. When the Russian princes began to arrive, the Polovtsi would run up to them, kiss their horses' reins, hold out their hands and plead:

¹The greatest devastations of Kiev took place in 1162, 1169, 1202, 1204, 1207 and 1210. Particularly memorable was the rout of 1204, when Prince Rurik Rostislavich summoned the savage Polovtsi in his struggle for power. They burned towns, assaulted the civilian population, plundered possessions and took prisoner a multitude of Kievans with young children.

"Gather your troops! Come to our steppe! Protect us! Help us drive away these vicious foes!"

The princes, each with his own retinue, convened in the courtyard; they stood apart, argued, occasionally walked around in order to hear who was saying what, but no matter how the Kievan prince's bailiffs might beseech them, they would not ascend to the Grand Prince's palace quarters.

The Polovtsian Khan Kotyan stood also in the courtyard, as proud as ever. Around him, sombre and motionless, stood his advisors in pointed caps, their hands clasped on their bellies, their faces darkened by the sun and the wind of the steppe. An old interpreter from among the steppe roamers was explaining to the khan which of the princes had already arrived and the names of this one or that and who was especially strong and influential. Once he determined who should be shown respect, Kotyan would waddle up to him and bow down, touching the ground with difficulty. Then he would straighten up with dignity, and, smoothing his long greying moustache, say the same thing to each one:

"Render help, be a brother! Death is upon us all! If we stand together side by side we will drive death away. Do not disdain my small gift. Accept my homage! I have forgotten no one, I want to honor all with fine pastures and horses and livestock and women."

The sun was already approaching its peak, and the princes were still scattered about the courtyard, shouting back and forth till they were hoarse: everyone watched to see who would be the first to enter the Kievan prince's quarters. It was said that Prince Mstislav Romanovich was still expecting someone — perhaps messengers from the north from the powerful and arrogant Prince of Suzdal, Yuri Vsevolodovich, who was anticipating his own conference there in Vladimir and had no intention of attending a council of princes in impoverished Kiev. And Prince Mstislav Udatny¹ of Galich was nowhere to be seen — he had especially encouraged everyone to attend the conference, and his messengers had entreated all: we are threatened by imminent disaster, come immediately!

All at once the crowd came to life and the message

¹*Udatny* — successful.

spread, "Mstislav Udatny has arrived!" They elbowed each other aside, trying to catch a glimpse of the prince who was famed for his successful campaigns and victories over the Ugrs and the Lyakhi.¹

Mstislav Udatny entered, his step springy despite his years. He stopped, surveying those gathered with an animated glance of his penetrating black eyes, as if seeking someone in particular, and stood for some time twirling his long droopy moustache. Ready for battle, he wore a gilded helmet, flashing in the sun's rays, and light, gold-plated mail. His red cloak billowed out when he walked. He caught sight of Khan Kotyan in the corner of the courtyard and made straight for him. The latter started forward to meet Mstislav, his arms extended. They embraced, and Kotyan pressed his head to the prince's chest. Kotyan's white cap fell into the dust, and everyone saw that the Polovtsian khan's shoulders were heaving convulsively.

"He's crying! Let him cry!" whispers spread through the crowd. "Those villains made slaves of so many of our people, now they will discover for themselves how bitter orphan tears are! Mstislav is married to Khan Kotyan's daughter, therefore he puts himself out for his wealthy father-in-law!"

The guards informed the Kievan prince of Mstislav Udatny's arrival. However, Mstislav Romanovich continued to delay, and did not come out on the porch to greet his cousin — old scores got in the way! And Mstislav, embracing Kotyan, walked away with him to a corner of the courtyard where they stood talking quietly for some time.

Once again everyone stirred, and cries were heard: "The Suzdal warriors have arrived! There will be great support! How could we start out on a campaign without them! No, it's not the Suzdal warriors at all, but the young Prince of Rostov, Vasilko Konstantinovich."

A slender young warrior entered the courtyard. Blond fuzz barely covered his chin. Like Mstislav of Galich he was ready for battle in mail and an iron helmet, with a long straight sword at his side. He was dressed modestly, his scarlet cloak faded. All his clothes were dusty and mud-spattered — it was clear that he had just climbed off his horse. Beside him trudged an old man with long

¹*Lyakhi* — Poles.

greying curls falling down on his shoulders; a psalter hung on a rawhide strap slung over his shoulder.

"It is the blind minstrel! The famous minstrel Gremislav! He was once a military leader, routed the Polovtsi many a time, and out of meanness the Prince of Ryazan, Gleb, threw him in the dungeon, blinded him and kept him there for three years. There in his seclusion Gremislav began composing songs, and he was let out of the dungeon. Since then he has roamed from one town to the next singing ballads about the olden days... Perhaps we shall hear Gremislav today."

The young Prince Vasilko walked around to all the others with an amiable smile and displays of due respect for the older princes. The princes came forth to meet him and asked, "Why haven't the warriors of Suzdal arrived? You are their neighbor, do you know why they are not here? The Grand Prince of Suzdal Yuri Vsevolodovich is your own uncle — did you not persuade him?"

"He is still considering! And whether or not he comes even the sorcerers could not say..."

Ten guards came out onto the porch in pairs, all looking exceptionally fine in their helmets and mail, with their short spears. They descended the steps and stopped on either side of the staircase, awaiting Prince Mstislav Romanovich. He came out slowly, leaning on a staff with a golden eagle. His stern eyes with their straight brows gazed wearily and joylessly. His slightly divided, grey-streaked beard, the cross and gold icon on his chest, his brocade caftan — the whole icon-like appearance of the prince spoke more of spiritual vigils and nocturnal prayers than of military concerns. Limping slightly the prince descended the stairs and stopped on the last step.

"Welcome, dear guests!" he said in a voice that was sad and burdened with cares.

All the princes in the courtyard began shouting at once, cutting each other off.

"Why did you summon us? To save the savage Polovtsi? Let them be crushed! We will be better off without them! Let them save themselves, and we shall stand by and watch!"

The portly Khan Kotyan stepped out of the crowd and, waddling on his crooked legs, hurried up to the porch. He swept the ground with his hand, touched the prince's

gold-embossed garments and said, sobbing, "Your Princely Highness! You have always been kind to me just as I have been to you! Be a father to us now! Help us drive away this vicious people of Khan Jenghiz! These villains called Tatars scour our land like wolves. Today they have taken away all our land, and tomorrow they will come here and take all your Russian land. Protect us! If you do not help us, we will all be slain, and you Russians will be slain tomorrow! We must all unite and fight as one army."

"Stop your croaking! What a lot of nonsense!" sounded angry voices. "Quiet, let him speak! Why bark when you've nothing to say?!" others protested.

Still others objected, "The Polovtsi are our enemies! They are on our land now, weak and helpless. I say we slay them all and collect their riches!"

New voices, cutting each other off, merged into a wild din. The Kievan prince looked around helplessly and threw up his hands in dismay. The shouts grew only louder.

Prince Mstislav Udatny, swift and decisive, mounted the steps of the porch.

"Glorious princes and honest military commanders, and all Russians brave!" said Mstislav. "Are we not all sons of one sacred Russian land? Let us forget our old quarrels and discord and wars with the Polovtsi! We fought them and took them captive, and they burned and devastated us... Now hard times have come both for the Polovtsi and for us. When a new unknown enemy attacks, friendship is better than war with the Polovtsi. If we do not aid them now in their struggle with the infidel Tatars of Khan Jenghiz, the Polovtsi might go over to their side, and the enemy forces will become even greater."

"But what kind of people are these Tatars? Perhaps they are simple warriors, more simple than the Polovtsi. How many of them are there?"

"Khan Kotyan together with the Alans fought against the Tatars of Jenghiz. He says they attack together, they fight well. They have come from afar, crossing the country of the Obez¹ and the Iron Gates. Alone the Polovtsi haven't the strength to stop the Tatars. The Tatars plundered the Polovtsian camps, captured their wives and their horses and their livestock, and all the riches of

¹*Obez* — a tribe inhabiting the North Caucasus.

Kotyan and other Polovtsian leaders. Now they have more prisoners than they know what to do with, they have gorged themselves like dogs on carrion, and placed their abundant stores at Lukomorye, on the shores of the Khazar Sea... They are advancing light, without their wagon trains, toward Russian lands. And if anyone says that my efforts are not for the good of the sacred Russian lands, but for father-in-law Khan Kotyan, now a pauper, all this is a lie!..”

The crowd listened to the famed Prince Mstislav with bated breath. Isolated cries resounded:

“It is far to the shores of the Khazar Sea, about twelve days’ journey.”

“This is not the first time we have had to meet unwelcome guests! The Kievan prince will have to meet him, so let him worry about it!..”

The crowd buzzed; they all knew there to be no fraternal love among the princes, no single will, knew that old malice brewed in them, old scores smit them.

Singing was heard. A church procession in brocade chasubles appeared just in time to stay the burning passions and quarrels of the princes. Four broad-chested deacons swinging censers, boys bearing fat wax candles, old archpriests with metal crosses in their hands, and finally, the Metropolitan in a heavy gold mitre — a dark, black-bearded Greek supported by two boys — all moved toward the porch with their slow singing and stopped. Silence settled in at once.

The Kievan prince approached the metropolitan, bowed, pressing his palms together, kissed the old priest’s blessing hand and whispered softly, “Give a sermon, Holy Father! Persuade the princes to stand together in friendship, forgetting old grudges!”

The Metropolitan rose to the porch, blessing all with the sign of the cross, and began reciting a memorized sermon, pronouncing the Russian words with difficulty.

“Beloved sons and brethren! Learn to be pious in the word of the Gospel! Do good deeds in the name of the Lord! Restraint for the tongue, humility for the mind, enslavement for the flesh, death for wrath!..”

The Kievan prince stood, his head bowed meekly. Mstislav of Galich looked around in alarm and saw open mouths and displeasure written on the faces of those gathered. But the Metropolitan went on:

"If you are deprived of something, reconcile yourself and do not avenge! If you are hated and driven away, bear it! If you are abused, pray! The Lord instructed us to conquer the enemy with three good deeds: repentance, tears and charity..."

Mstislav quietly approached the four deacons and whispered, "That Greek is out of his mind! He's mixed everything up! To whom does he speak of tears and repentance? Why, these are princes to whom he speaks, not servants and peasants! Quickly begin singing some psalm and there will be a lamb for each of you!"

The Metropolitan went on babbling something, while the four deacons began singing a psalm in unison, and all the archpriests and young boys joined in, in voices shrill and deep. The prince's servants surrounded the stunned Metropolitan and escorted him to the prince's chambers.

The young Prince of Rostov Vasilko climbed to the top of the staircase.

"I raced here from the faraway north, from Rostov the Great. For the sake of the Russian lands and for the sake of Christians I wish to tell you this: messengers came in haste to us from the Prince of Kiev Mstislav Romanovich, entreating us to gather our troops and hurry to the defense of the Russian lands. I have brought my small army, while the most powerful of us, the Prince of Suzdal Yuri Vsevolodovich is still contemplating whether the Tatars will go to Suzdal or pass it by. And now I am hearing the same words: 'Each man look out for his own skin!' While the holy Metropolitan speaks words meant not for a warrior but for an old man before his death — words about repentance and tears... We will not stop the enemy with quiet meekness, nor will we retain our lands..."

"Vasilko is right!" came shouts from the crowd.

"This vicious and unknown people is moving fast... We must meet the unwelcome guests with honor. We must fight them back and crush them forever. The Tatars have no wings, they cannot fly across the Dnieper, and even if they can, they must land, and then we shall see what God sends..."

"We will meet them with swords and pole-axes!"

"Let the princes proceed to the quarters of Prince Mstislav Romanovich," Vasilko went on, "and in accordance with ancient custom sit down in a tight circle on one

rug and decide: do we meet our vile foes with tears and repentance or in the tested way of our grandfathers — with whetted swords and pole-axes?"

"Prince Vasilko is right!"

"Let it be so!" came shouts from all directions.

"But who will be our commander? Who will lead the troops? I will not go under the hand of Mstislav Romanovich!" sounded the cries from one side.

The other side joined in, "Let Mstislav of Galich lead our army. It was not without reason he was dubbed Udatny — he will bring us success!.."

Twenty-three princes proceeded to the quarters of the Kievan prince in order to decide what to do. They thought at length but could come to no agreement. Mstislav Udatny maintained that they should attack the Tatar camp at Lukomorye. "Once we have seized their stores and divided their wealth among all, then not just prince but simple soldier too will receive no small booty."

This idea of a march to Lukomorye was to the liking of many, but the princes were incapable of choosing one commander for all the troops.

In the meantime one of the roamers came running up from the steppe. He reported that the Tatars were moving toward the Dnieper in a great horde. This hastened the decision to move against the Tatars, crossing the Dnieper at the island of Khortitsa.

The princes finally decided that each prince would march on his own with his host, and he was not to hinder the others. Whoever was lucky enough to reach Lukomorye first and seize the Tatar camp was obliged to divide the loot fairly with the other princes.

Everyone kissed the cross and swore not to violate their vows, and if any of the princes were to offend another, then everyone was to unite against the instigator. Then they exchanged kisses with each other. But Mstislav of Kiev and Mstislav of Galich turned their backs on one another.

When the princes adjourned, Prince Vasilko was sombre in his thoughts and worries. Glum, he stepped out onto the porch. The old singer Gremislav was awaiting him.

"This will end in calamity," said Vasilko. "This is not the way to fight. We should not go seeking the Tatar riches, but sweep away our enemies so that they will never

str again. And to march separately, each man turning his back on the next, is to bring bedlam upon ourselves.”

A warm evening settled in. Bright stars shone above the princely chambers. Long oak tables stood in the courtyard, set up for supper. When all the guests had taken seats along the oak benches and grown quiet as they sampled the prince's pies and roasted swans, and boys with flaming torches had positioned themselves around the tables, everyone saw by their red flickering light the old minstrel Gremislav, sitting on the top step of the porch. The strings of the resonant psaltery began twanging gently, and the old minstrel, raising the red cavities of his eyes to the sky, began singing his favorite ballad in a slightly cracked voice.

Gremislav sang of the daring campaign waged by Igor Svyatoslavich against the Polovtsi, about the quarrels and strife among the princes, about the pointless death of Russian warriors this had caused, about how these quarrels had “opened to the enemies the gates to the Russian lands”.

Many of the listeners bowed their heads in thought: could not the discord and mutual hatred of the princes cause a similar misfortune now? And might not this strife and enmity stifle a great Russian cause — the defense of their homeland?

Chapter Eight

SABUTAI BAHADAR'S PLAN

Sabutai summoned ten of his commanders of a thousand. Chepe also arrived with ten. Young and old, they gathered round in a circle inside the yurt. They listened to what Chepe had to say. Chepe, for his part, stared over their heads as if seeing something far in the distance.

“Kiev is a wealthy city,” Chepe was saying. “The houses for prayer have high round roofs, and they are covered with pure gold. We shall strip these golden roofs and erect a steed cast of pure gold beside Jenghiz Khan's tent, the size of his white horse Seter.”

“We shall present Jenghiz Khan with a steed of gold!” exclaimed the Mongols.

"The Uruses have many khans; they are called in their tongue 'princes'. And all of these khans — 'princes' — fight among themselves like so many wild dogs. Therefore it will not be difficult to rout them. No one has gathered these 'princes' into one quiver, and they have not a Jenghiz Khan of their own."

"Nowhere in the world will you find another leader like our great Jenghiz Khan!"

"I tell you: we must attack the Russian land swiftly, set fire to it from all sides and capture Kiev before..." Chepe paused.

"Before what?" asked the commanders.

"Before the reply to our report to the great one and only arrives."

"Jenghiz Khan will order us to await his arrival! Jenghiz Khan will wish to enter Kiev himself!" said the Mongols. "We have already taken such great cities as Bukhara, Samarkand, Gurganj, and we will have no difficulty taking Kiev. We must capture Kiev at once!"

Everyone cast sidelong glances at Sabutai, waiting to hear what the cunning and cautious leopard with a gnawed-off paw would say. He sat hunched over to one side and surveyed each man in turn with his piercing eye.

"It will not be as easy to crush the Uruses as Chepe Noyon thinks," said the commander Gemyabek.

"There are many Uruses and Kipchaks — one hundred thousand — while we are few — twenty thousand plus one tumen of various vagrants. They will scatter like a flock of sparrows should we begin to retreat. It is dangerous for us to enter Russian lands, where there is a large — very large — and formidable army. We must not advance on Kiev... From here we must go back, back under the mighty hand of Jenghiz Khan..."

"But do you not recall, brave warrior Gemyabek," said Chepe, "that there were even more Tsins¹ than there are Uruses when you and I and other warriors charged into their ploughed fields beyond the Great Wall of China?"

Sabutai stirred and waved his hand. Everyone fell silent and leaned in his direction.

"To begin with, we must recall how the one and only proceeded in the past. Then we must consider what he

¹Tsins — Chinese.

would do in our place," Sabutai said slowly. "First we must outsmart the enemy, scratch him under the chin until he begins to purr, stretches out on his back and throws out his paws... Then pounce on him and slit his throat!"

Everyone sat up straight and exchanged glances. The decision had been made: there could be no thoughts of going back to the protection of the mighty hand of the great kagan... Sabutai went on:

"The Uruses are many! They are so strong that they could crush us like the foot of a camel crushes the locust sitting on the road. But they have no order! Their princes are always bickering among themselves. Their army is a herd of mighty bulls that roam the steppe in different directions... However, the Uruses have their own Chepe! His name is bahadar Mastislab.¹ They say this Mastislab has fought extensively and known only victory thus far. But the Uruses have not their own Sabutai Bahadar to come to his aid when Mastislab charges ahead into danger!.."

"We will capture him, this Mastislab, and take him to Jenghiz Khan!" cried the Mongols.

"I promise," Sabutai added, "that he who catches Mastislab and removes his golden helmet will be the very one to take him to Jenghiz Khan."

The conference went on for a long time. Everyone spoke in a whisper so that the sentries would not overhear the decisions of the Mongol commanders.

The next day Chepe started out for the west with his tumen of horsemen, while Sabutai remained on the banks of the river Kalka with another tumen in order to strengthen the horses and prepare them for the decisive battle.

Chapter Nine

THE MONGOLS ON THE BANKS OF THE DNIEPER

It was an unusually warm spring. A hot dry wind blew for many days. The lush grass began to wilt and curl. The sun beat down relentlessly and, like the prodding eye of Sabutai, seemed to urge everyone on.

¹Sabutai is referring to Mstislav Udatny. — *Ed.*

Chepe Noyon divided his *tumen* into five parts. With one detachment made up of two thousand horsemen he raced ahead to the Dnieper, while the four remaining detachments he stationed along the old road that wound across the steppe.

Several hundred Tatars galloped off into the vast steppe and wherever they found Kipchak nomads with herds, drove them to the road.

At the head of a hundred dust-covered *nukers*, Chepe approached the wide Dnieper, sparkling in the sun's rays. Black caulked boats were moving along the river's smooth blue waters.

"Look, there are the Russian troops!" said the interpreter.

On a knoll by the bank stood some Russian soldiers in iron helmets, holding short spears. Shading their eyes from the sun, they gazed into the distant reaches of the steppe. Once they saw that it was not Kipchaks but horsemen of another tribe who were approaching, the Russians ran to the river and rowed away from shore in boats.

In a pointed steel helmet, sombre and bronzed by the sun, Chepe staid his horse on a cliff above the river and stood surveying with narrow unblinking eyes the hilly plain of the opposite bank. He could see the outline of a large camp and wagons with raised staffs standing in rows. Herds of multicolored horses grazed nearby. Foot and cavalry warriors moved about the plain, and sun sparks glanced brightly off their metal weapons.

A few boats lingered near the shore. The oarsmen rowed diligently, fighting the current. From one of the boats came the cry, "Hey you, uninvited guests! What are you after in these parts? What foul wind brought you here?"

The two roamers accompanying Chepe translated words that reached them from the boats.

"We are moving not on you, but on the Kipchaks!" one of the roamers replied in a stentorian voice. "The Kipchaks are our serfs and our horse tenders. Crush them and take their livestock and wagon trains. The Kipchaks have brought much evil upon us, and they have been a nuisance to you too for quite some time. We want peace with you. We have no war with you."

"Send your emissaries and we will talk with them!" came shouts from the boat.

"Who should we talk to? Is there a high commander in your midst?"

"There are many princes here. They will reach an agreement with your emissaries!"

Chepe selected four nukers and one roamer as an interpreter and ordered them to set out for the opposite bank. They were instructed to see the head Kievan prince and say to him: the Uruses should drive the Kipchaks away, taking their livestock and riches, and here on the steppe the Tatars will finish them off.

The chosen nukers shifted from one foot to the other, scratched their backs with their lassoes and said, "Why waste time talking to the Uruses? Let us begin fighting them at once."

Chepe said, "Then I'll go with the interpreter by myself."

"No!" the nukers cried. "Do not go there! What will become of our army without you? What will the wolf cubs do without their tested leader? They will skin you alive. Stay here! We shall go."

The four nukers and the roamer went down to the river and summoned the Russians who were moving about near the bank. One boat came to shore and collected the Mongol emissaries.

Chepe remained on the high bank for some time, gazing at the other side. Meadows, groves and blue creeks stretched far into the foggy haze; from every side the wind carried along the roads clouds of dust raised by the approaching troops.

That night Chepe lay on a barrow by a fire, wrapped in a sheepskin coat. He awaited the emissaries he had sent to the Russians. But they never returned. The Kipchaks had slain them.

Distant campfires flickered on the steppe all around. The plain was alive with its unknown life. Some alarmed horsemen made their way across the steppe along deep ravines, and the flames of distant fires flared up in the night.

Chepe could not sleep. Dark thoughts, fragments of conversations, familiar faces passed through his mind, and he would rise into a fever, then sink back into semi-slumber... Then again before him would appear the

iron helmet with black fox tails of the feared old man Jenghiz Khan and his unblinking greenish feline eyes, or the single prodding eye of Sabutai, or the swipes of flashing swords...

Impending now were battles with the Uruses, strong warriors who did not flee but came looking for a fight on their own. To defeat them would prove very difficult!.. It was the onset of days that might mark the end of Chepe's glory, won through his victories in China.

He would either lay down his life on these steppes, or his name would once again resound in the kagan's golden yurt as that of conqueror of the Uruses and the Kipchaks, the one who had seized the golden helmet of Mastislab.

In the morning Chepe was awakened by some nukers.

"Look what is happening on the other side: the Uruses have driven many boats from upstream and are tying them together to make a bridge across the river. Their wagons have already descended right to the water. Many cavalymen and foot warriors have gathered there.¹ They will begin crossing to this side soon. What should we do?"

"Do not hinder the Uruses!" Chepe ordered. "Observe from afar and retreat into the steppe!"

Chapter Ten

THE URUSES AND KIPCHAKS MARCH INTO THE STEPPE

...And the desire to crush the Tatars flared up in the Uruses and Kipchaks: they thought their foe retreated in fear, in their weakness not wishing to fight them, and therefore they pursued the Tatars with perseverance. The Tatars continued to retreat, while the others chased them for twelve days.

Ibn al-Athir

Chepe Noyon's lean bay horse flew up the lone barrow with ease and came to a halt near the tall stone figure of a steppe warrior. His broad rounded shoulders, flat face,

¹The South-Russian princes decided during the council in Kiev to meet the Tatars on foreign land and started marching in April. The various detachments united at the Dnieper: the Kiev, Chernigov, Smolensk, Kursk, Trubchevsk, Putivl, as well as those of Volyn and Galich, who arrived by boat.

short sword at his hip, pointed hat and even the cup in his hands had been painstakingly carved from a single stone with the hammer and chisel of nomadic craftsmen back in ancient times... Centuries had passed, and the once populous country had become a barren steppe, while the stone warrior continued to stand firm, buried deep in the ground, on the crest of the barrow, staring sullenly with his unseeing bulging eyes at the lands where he had once staged his attacks.

Chepe sat astride his steed, as motionless as the idol, staring with cold squinting eyes in the direction from which trains of swiftly moving black dots spread across the green steppe, steaming with morning haze... His frothy horse had already cooled off and was tugging freely at its reins, trying to reach the wilted stubs of pale wormwood with its black lips; it was already stamping the saline earth, but Chepe could not tear his eyes away from the oncoming dense rows of Russian warriors.

At the head were the horsemen... Some were scattered along the road, others had spread out throughout the steppe... A black cloud of dust rose up around them... They had short spears... The wagons could be clearly discerned in the dust. The Uruses were counting on a lavish loot; their wagons were filled with weapons, cauldrons and sacks of grain.

Chepe drew up the reins. It was time to go... The Uruses had already noticed the lone horseman on the barrow... Several Uruses and Kipchaks had split off from the detachment and were heading swiftly in his direction. Another group of horsemen raced ahead along the road in order to cut him off. But Chepe had good reason to love his bay stallion, one of the finest runners in his tumen.

Chepe raced down the dusty saline slope of the barrow. The ground to one side was dug up and a narrow black entrance could be seen — probably now the den of some steppe wolves. But someone had dug into the grave of the warrior in the hopes of stealing his gold treasures...

Chepe quickened his horse's pace. He must make his way to the ravine. There Gemyabek's hundreds were waiting in ambush. The Tatar scouts had lain down in the grass and could see everything perfectly — both the approach of the Uruses and Chepe's flight from them.

But the Urus horsemen drew ever nearer. They had fine steeds, and the best runners had been placed in front. The most dangerous were those who were racing to cut him off. It was impossible to veer away — to the left lay ravines with abrupt banks, to the right were the Uruses.

There were nine of them... The three in the rear began to fall behind... The forward six also split up — they wanted to surround him.

A flock of grey partridges flew out from under the horse's hooves and fluttered away, falling to the grass once more. A hare darted out from beneath wide burdock and bolted ahead, its ears held down flat. But the steed went on galloping with the same ease, throwing forth its reddish legs, sailing over tall weeds and carrying Chepe, who clung to its mane, swiftly away.

The enemy was quite close now... Chepe could make out their tanned faces beneath their helmets... Two of the Uruses guarded themselves with red shields: one was very young with a ruddy face and black eyes, the other had a droopy grey moustache. The nearest was the third in a bright-scarlet chekmen — a Kipchak on a black steed... He was winding his lasso around his arm...

Unerring was Chepe's eye, and his arrows never missed their mark. Chepe drew his terrible taut bow and the Kipchak, waving his arms, tumbled from the saddle. The frightened black horse raced on riderless, its head raised, its long mane fluttering in the wind.

The young Russian warrior was close... A few moments more and the horses would collide. The youth swung his short spear, but it merely glanced off the Tatar's armored shoulder... Chepe's second long arrow pierced the youth between his black shining eyes. Farewell to glory! Farewell to the bright sun, the paternal home!

Chepe did not look back... His eyes scoured the plain: where were Gemyabek's nukers? There they were! A whole throng of them had scrambled out of the ravine and were charging to meet the advancing Russian detachment with a fierce howl.

The Russian horsemen quickly assumed a new formation, closing into tight rows. Their red shields — round at the top and pointed at the bottom — lined up in an even and menacing chain. They drew their freshly sharpened gleaming swords and charged the Tatars unswervingly.

But Gemyabek and his nukers remembered Chepe's order well: having come within range of an arrow's flight, they turned their horses abruptly, raced past the astounded Uruses, releasing fatal arrows, and galloped back into the steppe at full pelt.

With cries the Uruses charged after them. Their even rows had already fallen into disarray. They galloped each on his own, trying to overtake the fleeing Tatars. Some of the Uruses astride fine steeds caught a dozen stragglers. They slew them, seized their weapons and boots and mounted the Tatar steeds.

Surrounded by bodyguards, Chepe watched the first encounter between the Tatars and the Uruses for a short time. He rode down into a ravine where a spring flowed, watered his steed and ordered the entire Tatar detachment to retreat farther.

Gemyabek's men returned and reported that their leader, wounded by a spear, had fallen along with his horse, was surrounded by Urus riders, but had managed to get free and gallop off into the steppe. Many Kipchaks had raced after him.

That night, with the help of the roamers, Chepe himself interrogated the Russian prisoner. The latter reported that this was the front-running detachment under the leadership of the courageous Prince Mstislav Udatny. He was accompanied by warriors from Galich and from the towns of Volyn. They had sailed down the Dniester to the sea, turned into the mouth of the Dnieper and from there sailed back up to the island Khortitsa, where there was to be a gathering of all the detachments moving on the Tatars.

"The princes do not get along," said the prisoner. "Everyone moves in separate detachments; each detachment has its own commander, while there is no chief commander at the head of all the troops. The warriors had concurred among themselves that Mstislav Udatny should be made the head commander — for experienced and ardent he is in battle — but the Kievan Prince Mstislav Romanovich argued against him. He simply cannot submit because he considers himself the senior, a grand prince. This discord among the princes means only sorrow and ruin for the simple warriors; for if the Tatars conquer us, all the princes will gallop

away on their swift steeds, while the simple men will lay down their lives. The warriors took to the road on their plough horses; you won't run far on them. The Tatars slip away from them like spry grass-snakes."

Chepe asked if there were many Kipchaks. The prisoner replied that there was said to be very many Kipchaks. Their detachments were moving along the left bank of the Dnieper, hastening to meet up with the Russian troops at Khortitsa. And now up ahead a Kipchak detachment led by Yarus was moving with Mstislav Udatny.

"And what do the Uruses say about the tatar warriors?" Chepe asked.

"They used to say that the Tatar warriors were weak, even weaker than the Kipchak. That is why the princes hurry without fear to seize the Tatar camp and the loot plundered by the Tatars. But now I have noticed that the Tatars are fine warriors, their arrows accurate."

Chepe ordered the Tatars to retreat farther into the steppe and make no fires at night, while the Russian prisoner was to be slain.

That night the roamers and the Tatar scouts crept up to the Russians' vanguard detachment and listened to what was being said there. The Russian warriors slept in the middle of a ring made up of wagons. The Kipchaks kept separate camps, sang and danced by the fires. They were glad to be returning to their abandoned camp, from which they would now rout the Tatars.

The scouts reported that the Uruses had captured the head of the Tatar thousand Gemyabek. Fleeing, he had hid in a barrow, in a wolves' lair. The Uruses had hauled him out and turned him over to the Kipchaks. The Kipchaks had tied his arms and legs to four horses, and the horses, charging in different directions, had torn him to pieces... The Kipchak commander Yarus had strung a horse's rein through the ears of Gemyabek's severed head and carried it with him on his saddle.

Chapter Eleven

THE TATARS' TRAP

Chepe and the Tatars retreated, keeping close watch on the swiftly advancing Russian detachment. The Tatars

would occasionally engage in skirmishes with the Kipchak riders who flew out ahead, but there were no major battles.

Making long marches, the Russians would sometimes stop by day, and the horsemen would round up the Kipchak bulls grazing on the spring meadows. These herds were driven on by the order of Chepe. Tatar herdsmen would tend the herds until the Russian and Kipchak warriors approached; then the herdsmen would run away, rejoining the Tatars.

Chepe did everything possible to spread the Russian forces thin, to weaken their vigilance, so that they would gorge themselves on beef during their halts and be oblivious of danger. The Russian detachments moved in separate divisions, drifting farther and farther apart, stretching out along the wide dusty road. Bedding down for the night, they no longer encircled themselves with fences and wagons.

New Russian prisoners told that the warriors were pleased with the campaign, with the abundance of livestock seized: "Now we shall don sheepskin coats, and sew new boots from ox-hide..." "Where is the incalculable strength of the Tatars? There are more Kipchak bulls than Tatars. We shall reach Lukomor'ye in pursuit of them and never even see a single Tatar camp."

One of the Russian detachments moved in tighter formation than the others; it maintained military order and the warriors moved together, not dispersing across the steppe. At night they always put up a ring of wagons and sent scouts out in all directions. These were the troops of the Grand Prince of Kiev Mstislav Romanovich. The Kievans marched apart from the others; half of them foot soldiers, the other half rode plough horses. They too stopped from time to time and sent riders to gather up the wandering Kipchak livestock, fattened on the spring grass. Then they would make meat soup in copper pots, after which the warriors would sleep soundly till morning.

The Tatars said that the Urus horses were not as spry or stalwart as the Tatar, that the Urus arrows did not fly as far, but that the Uruses were stronger in hand-to-hand combat when they swung their long-handled axes, and the Uruses were steadfast and determined.

After each short skirmish with the Russian detachments the Tatars would flee far into the steppe, hiding behind hills and slipping away along ravines.

The days were sweltering, and not a single cloud sailed across the sky to daunt the relentlessly burning sun. The troops kicked up clouds of black dust which suffocated men and horses alike. Several of the detachments left the road for the steppe and marched across virgin soil, but there too the parched earth crumbled under their feet and a black cloud of dust hung over the army.

During these hot days springs started drying up, and the men began to gripe: "Why have they driven us to the steppe to look for the Tatars? Is it not time to return home, taking with us the Kipchak livestock we have already seized?"

Chapter Twelve

SABUTAI BAHADAR PREPARES FOR BATTLE

The aged commander spent two days in the saddle, surveying the area and selecting a battle field advantageous to the Mongols.

Three times messengers arrived on frothy horses.

"Chepe Noyon is retreating... A detachment of long-bearded ones is in the fore... It is led by bahadar Mastislab... With it are the Kipchaks of Khan Yaron... He carries on a strap on his saddle the head of our commander Gemyabek..."

The last night before the battle Sabutai returned to his yurt on the hill, where beside the horned, five-tailed bunchuk stood planted in the ground ten tall spears with the bunchuks of all the commanders of thousands in the detachment. The whole tumen was now gathered on the plain, which hummed with the sounds of camp life.

Sabutai lay on a felt mat. His bones ached. He tossed and turned. The fire in the yurt smoked as it died down. Smoke spread beneath the charred felt of the vault, slowly seeping out through the opening in the roof. The side flaps were raised, but there was no refreshing breeze to pass through the wooden frame. The stagnant hot air

hung over the parched plain of the Kalka.

The old Mongol commander could not sleep and lay listening to the dull sounds of the quieting camp. He could see the fires through the frame of the yurt, casting a purple sheen over the warriors sitting in circles around them. Fragments of conversations and the monotonous clanking of an iron blade on a whetting stone reached his ear. Someone began singing:

*Oh warrior, you shall not see the green meadows
of your native Kerulen,
Your path leads you into the valley of white
bones...*

An angry voice bellowed, "Shut up! You will call forth the black bird of misfortune!"

The song stopped short. From somewhere came the shouts, "Halt! Who goes there?" Sabutai rose with difficulty and sat down. The droning of a crowd and the even plodding of hooves approached... In came a bodyguard.

"Tohuchar Noyon has arrived. He is followed by his entire detachment of ten thousand men."

"What good is he to me?"

"Noyon is climbing the hill, he wishes to see you."

Sabutai, heaving and coughing, stood up and left the yurt. Before him in the semi-darkness stood a tall warrior in an iron helmet.

"I wish you the bliss of the eternal sky! I have come straight from the golden yurt to place my bunchuk alongside yours."

"So far I have managed quite well on my own..."

"This all Mongols know. Now I must speak with you."

The two commanders went inside the yurt. Tohuchar Noyon, sitting down on the felt mat beside Sabutai, told him in a whisper about Jenghiz Khan's order to march west in search of the army of Mongols gone ahead and about the letter of the great kagan being delivered by special messenger.

Sabutai coughed for a long time and shook his head in silence.

He leaned over to Tohuchar and said also in a whisper, "I do not know what is written in the letter of the great one... I cannot fail to heed his will. Perhaps the one and only wishes us success, or perhaps he demands our return?..

Then my men will refuse to fight... But tomorrow the Uruses will arrive here. If we retreat right before the battle, what will they think?.. They will say that the army of the great Jenghiz Khan show their horses' tails at the very sight of the Urus beard..."

Sabutai fell silent and began coughing again.

"I have not seen the letter!.. I have heard nothing of it!.. Now I shall lie down to sleep, and in the morning, when the cock crows, I will advance to meet the Uruses. If the god of war Sulde, the god of fire Galakhan and our other gods protect me from arrow and sword, you and I shall meet after the battle, and you will present me with the letter of the great kagan before the entire army... Farewell!"

Twice in the night Sabutai fanned the coals of the fire and fed it dry twigs. He glanced at the golden cock, tethered to the frame of the yurt by a silver chain. The cock sat ruffled up, paying its master no heed. It opened a glistening round eye then drew a white lid down over it again.

Sabutai dozed off toward morning. The cock suddenly crowed loudly and began flapping its wings. The old slave Saklab entered the yurt at once and began building up the fire. Imitating the cock's song, two shamans in the neighboring yurt cried, "Hori-hori! Hori-so!"

Sabutai looked askance at Saklab — what was amiss with him? Laying out the silk cloth the old Russian slave had a particularly solemn air about him: his grey hair was combed on two sides and tied down with a strap, a necklace of bear teeth had appeared on the tanned wrinkled neck... Saklab left and came back with a bowl of boiled rice and finely chopped lamb. He put the bowl down on the silk cloth before Sabutai and beside it placed several thin flat loaves folded in four.

"Here is Gurganj pilaf, with red pepper..."

"Why have you donned this bear necklace? Are you glad that you shall see your Urus brothers?.." Sabutai bent over the rice and sniffed it distrustfully.

"Poison! Feed it to your deceased father!" Sabutai hissed and pushed the bowl away.

"I am a slave, more contemptible than a dog," Saklab said humbly, "but in all my long life I have never done anyone any harm."

Sabutai scowled.

"Take the bowl and follow me! Sabutai Bahadar wants to pray."

Limping and panting, the old commander left the yurt and stopped beside it. He had issued his army an order the evening before: "In the morning, after the cock's first crow, assume battle formation on the plain beyond the hills."

Horsemen were riding in all directions, trumpets wailed, drums pounded, the cries of warriors urging their horses echoed across the plain.

Two old shamans in tall caps and shaggy coats hung with trinkets sat by a fire before the yurt. Having noticed the commander, the shamans began howling, beating tambourines and dancing around the fire.

Sabutai issued his final orders:

"Leave the yurts, the rugs and the felt mats here! You, Chubugan¹, will go with the pack horses. Take my three leopards, the cock and old Saklab, and keep an eye on him. He might just want to run away to his Urus brothers today... Bring me my horses!"

The bodyguards brought the horses; there were two amblers for riding and six pack horses. They were loaded down with heavy leather sacks. It was said that Sabutai carried in them all the gold he had acquired.

Sabutai walked up to a shaggy sorrel pack horse and made a sign to the bodyguard. Two men seized the horse's reins and, stroking it, led it up to the fire. Saklab was standing by with the bowl of rice. With his good left hand Sabutai grabbed a handful of rice, threw it into the fire and began to pray:

*Listen, my master, red fire Galakhan!
Your father is a tiny flint,
Your mother tempered steel.
I offer you a sacrifice:
Yellow oil by the ladle,
Black wine by the cup,
Animal fat with the hand.
Bring us luck,
Our horses strength,
Our hands an accurate blow!*

¹Chubugan — nimble.

The two shamans repeated Sabutai's invocations and beat the tambourines slowly. When the commander finished, the shamans grabbed the bowl of rice out of Saklab's hands and, sitting down on the ground, began devouring the rice greedily, loudly smacking their lips.

Sabutai pulled out a knife with a thin blade and made a cut in the sorrel's shoulder. The horse reared, and dark blood trickled down its silky coat. Sabutai caught firm hold of the withers and put his lips to the wound, sucking the blood.

The bodyguards stood motionless, watching reverently as the commander sated himself on hot blood before the important battle.

A warrior in an iron helmet and steel mail ascended the hill. He was covered with a thick layer of dust to his very brows, making him virtually unrecognizable. Sabutai looked up from the sorrel. A round, inquisitive eye shone on his blood-smeared face.

"Who are you, brave warrior?"

The warrior placed his hand on the steed's open wound and then drew it across Sabutai's dress.¹

"A thing is not lasting, a master is long-lived! Dust on the outside, oil within! I am Chepe Noyon!"

"Where are the Uruses?"

"Close, very close! They will soon be here... My hundreds are engaging them in battle and retreating, luring them this way... I am keeping watch on Mastislab with three hundreds... He and his detachment ride ahead... I want to capture him alive!"

"Only do not fall into his paws yourself!"

Sabutai mounted his sorrel ambler. A row of three Mongols moved before him. The middle one bore the horned bunchuk with the tails of five steeds. Sabutai slowly descended the hill, where a hundred bodyguards awaited him on the plain. Farther away on the parched steppe, dense ranks of horsemen were converging.

¹A Mongol custom of wishing someone health and long life.

Chapter Thirteen

THE BATTLE BEGINS

...No sooner had the Uruses come together for the battle than the Tatars descended upon them in great numbers, and both sides fought with unprecedented courage.

Ibn al-Athir

The cavalry detachment of Mstislav Udatny was the first to appear on the uneven banks of the river Kalka. He was followed by the Kipchak riders of commander Yarun. Mstislav caught sight of a large circle of abandoned Tatar yurts. Carpets, felt mats and sacks of grain were to be found in many, while the cinders in the campfires had not yet cooled.

"The Tatars fled like rabbits," said the combatants. "Where on earth will we catch them? How much longer will we have to go on trudging in the heat in pursuit of death?"

Prince Mstislav Udatny had vast experience in warring — he had spent his whole life in military campaigns, siding with anyone around as long as there was profit to be made. He was not pleased to find the abandoned Tatar camp — for it was not the camp but the Tatars themselves who were supposed to fall into his hands. Though he called for a halt, Mstislav ordered the men in his detachment to don their mail and prepare for battle at once. The prince sent his young son-in-law Danila Romanovich with the Volynians out on a reconnaissance mission. The impatient Yarun also set out with his men to seize the weary — as they all assumed — Tatars.

Presently a messenger arrived from Prince Danila.

"The Tatars are close by! The Tatars are here! Their scouts may be seen on the hills... When they see us they hide... What should we do?"

The prince called for a fresh steed. His men brought three saddled horses. Two of them were Hungarian bays with black manes, solid and broad-chested. They were now covered with dust and stood with heads bowed. The third, a gift from the prince's father-in-law, the Khan Kotyan, was a tall grey Turkmen stallion with

auburn speckles. Vicious of temperament, he bore the name Atkaz, which meant in Kipchak "goose-steed". It was with difficulty that the two grooms brought him forward, tugging on his reins.

Mstislav jumped on Atkaz and, restraining the horse's pent-up strength, descended to the river. He ordered his men to water their horses and assume battle formation. The prince was unsuspecting of traps on the part of the Tatars: he assumed they were avoiding battle because of their weakness, and for this reason decided not to delay even for a rest, but to overtake the Tatars, scatter them and finish them off.

His shining steel helmet, lavishly inlaid in gold, the tall Turkmen riding horse with its curved, swan-like neck — the whole bold bearing of the lean, sinewy Prince Mstislav told his men that he was a true warrior, that he loved the fire and danger of battle, sought out the enemy and charged him, and, tempered in so many military engagements and campaigns, was rightfully nicknamed Mstislav Udatny...

Having climbed up the opposite bank, Mstislav waited for the men to fall into line.

"So help us God!" cried Mstislav. "We will smash the pagan Tatars! Have no mercy on the vile tribe! Charge!"

The entire detachment moved forward at a trot. The warriors set right their arms in expectation of a great slaughter...

Mstislav saw a plain up ahead with Russian and Tatar horsemen dashing about it in clouds of black dust. This was the division of Volynians under the command of Mstislav's eighteen-year-old son-in-law, Prince Danila Romanovich. His light-blue standard, embroidered in gold, flashed into sight. Prince Danila's men surrounded him in a tight cordon, guarding him, while the Tatars circled in all directions, charging, colliding, falling and once more brandishing their long curved sabres.

The Kipchaks were beyond them. Mstislav saw that their detachment, where the five-tailed bunchuk of commander Yarun swayed, was disappearing in the direction of the hills, chasing a cloud of dust.

Mstislav decided to take to the left, cross the hills and, if a battle was raging beyond the hills, to attack the Tatars from the flank, in order to aid Yarun's men. He

led his horsemen round to the hills and, climbing to a higher knoll, stopped short, astounded by what he saw.

The solid ranks of a fresh Tatar army waited on the plain. The cavalry stood motionless, in menacing silence. He could clearly make out their iron helmets, shining mail and curved blades. Division after division of the Tatars stretched out across the plain... How many were there? Twenty regiments? Or more? Thirty? Fifty?

So this was where the Tatar forces were concentrated, lying in wait till the last day! While those small divisions that attacked and fled along the road from the Dnieper — that was but a lure, a shrewd Tatar trap!

To have erred so, to have lead his loyal men into a trap, straight upon the curved blades of the Tatars waiting for battle!.. What could he do? How could he save them? How could he win time enough to inform and gather all the Russian forces scattered far and wide in ignorant unconcern? "Our Russian troops are many, no less than the Tatar! But why are they not gathered together as such a menacing and invincible force as this?! Why does every prince march on his own, with his own men? If I had but one day to unite all the scattered Russian forces! Then we could test our strength against the Tatars."

But there was no time! The Tatars would now charge ahead and with an onslaught of thirty thousand fresh steeds crush everything in their path... "The dead know no shame!" Mstislav whispered and whipped his steed for the first time. The steppe horse reared and made a wild leap. It raced down the hill to the plain, and out from behind the hills flew a dense throng of Kipchak horsemen. With cries of horror and desperation they thrashed their steeds, knocking down and breaking the ranks of Mstislav's warriors, and raced on in a disorderly mob, throwing over everyone in their path. The young Danila Romanovich, seriously wounded, was carried away on a steed along with them. He could barely stay in his saddle, clinging to the horse's mane.

Up ahead the Tatars moved onto the plain in close ranks, strangely silent, their right sleeves rolled up to the shoulder, their curved blades held aloft. There was something sinister in the silent movement of that tight column of horsemen when, without a single cry, they

approached the banks of the Kalka at a trot.

Only the snorts of horses, a hollow pounding and the occasional clank of weapons broke the silence of the menacing Mongol army, bound by one chain and one will.

The Tatars crossed the river, climbed up the opposite bank, and only then did their piercing trumpet signals ring out. They charged on the Russians' camp with a savage wail. The latter had already seen the headlong flight of the crazed Kipchak detachment and were hastily moving their heavy wagons into a circle.

Wasting no time near the first Russian detachment, the Tatars galloped on, charging the oncoming wagon trains.

All the Russian troops stretched out along the road saw the driven horses of the Kipchak horsemen and Prince Mstislav Udatny riding among them. His red cape flying in the wind, he galloped somberly on his lanky grey stallion.

Many Russians, abandoning their wagons, mounted their steeds and raced back to the Dnieper. Others pulled the wagons into circles and met the charging Tatars with a fight.

One part of the Tatar troops besieged the camp of the Kievan Prince Mstislav Romanovich. The Kievan prince had a force of ten thousand cavalry and foot soldiers; he had maintained no contact with the other detachments, did not know what Mstislav Udatny was undertaking, and boasted that alone, without anyone's help, he would destroy the Tatars of Khan Jenghiz "brought by an ill wind".

At noon on that black day, the men of Kiev made their camp on the high bank of the river Kalka. They too had placed their wagons around them in a ring when the crazed Kipchak horsemen had suddenly rushed past like an avalanche.

Eleven princes in the Kievan army said, "Here lies our death! We shall stand firm!"

They exchanged farewell kisses and resolved to fight to the last breath.

The Kievans moved the wagons into a tighter circle, took up a position behind the wheels, protecting themselves with their red shields. They met the charging Tatars with arrows and fought them off with swords and pole-axes.

Chapter Fourteen

"AND THE BATTLE IT WAS LONG AND CRUEL..."¹

Clouds of dust sailed over the vast parched plain, and wherever the dust billowed with particular density men were to be found fighting, riderless horses dashed about, and the moans of the wounded, savage cries, the pounding of drums and the shrill notes of trumpets sounded.

Sabutai Bahadar stood on a hill, surrounded by a hundred select bodyguards. He dispatched some horsemen, instructing them to find out: "How are the warriors holding out? Are there any fresh Russian troops in sight? Does danger threaten from anywhere?" But the messengers returned and said that the Mongols were overpowering everywhere, that the Uruses were retreating to the Dnieper, fighting, falling, the wounded continuing to fight back — no one pleaded for mercy and no one had surrendered.

"A wolf's breed!" replied Sabutai. "Let them have a wolf's death!"

Having learned that the Kievan troop had surrounded itself with wagons and was fighting, Sabutai sent detachment after detachment against that camp with the order: "Overturn the wagons! Break the circle! Set fire to the steppe all around!"

The Mongols, pressing against the Russian covering forces, hurled their spears; drawing large bows, they released accurate arrows with heads of tempered steel and rolled up burning bundles of dry reeds — but the Russians held firm, repelling with arrows and rocks anyone who drew near, and the Tatars were unable to crush them.

On Sabutai's order, men from various tribes who had joined the Mongols moved on the Russian camp; they clambered up on top of the wagons, waving maces and curved blades, emitting savage cries and egging each other on. The Russians met them with blows from long-handled axes, swords and clubs, and fought back their assailants, who fell dead with shattered skulls.

On the third day Sabutai summoned the leader of the

¹A line from the old chronicles. — *T7*.

roamers Ploskinya. The latter appeared, wasted to a shadow by hunger. The tall, strong Ploskinya could now barely walk. Two Mongols stood behind him and poked him with their knives to make Ploskinya move forward. Sabutai said:

“Go to your Urus brothers and persuade them to lay down their swords and axes. Tell them they should go home... We will not touch them. If you succeed you shall have your freedom.”

Ploskinya, gripping the chain from the shackles on his legs, started toward the Russian camp. Two Mongols walked behind him holding the end of a leather leash wrapped around Ploskinya's neck. He stopped a few paces from the Russian wagons. The Russians climbed onto the wagons and stared in bewilderment at the strange emaciated man with heavy stocks on his neck. Some recognized him: “It's Ploskinya the horse-trader! He drove herds of Kipchak horses to Kiev and was the translator for the Kipchak khans!”

Ploskinya began shouting to the Russians:

“The Tatar Khan Sabutai Bahadar ordered me to tell you to fight in vain no more. If you surrender to their mercy they will let you go just like that... Only leave your goods — sheepskins, wagons and axes. The Tatars need this for all their trouble, for they have spent a great deal on these campaigns.”

“You lie, gasbag Ploskinya, just like you lied at market when you sold us broken-winded horses!”

“Do not listen to him!” cried the old warriors. “Better to leave with our swords and make our way to the Dnieper. At least half of us will make it home, while without our axes and swords we shall all lay down our lives here on this steppe!”

But Ploskinya swore he was telling the truth, took off his cross, kissed it, cried and said, “Could I speak otherwise while the Tatars jab their knives into my back?!”

And the Tatars nodded and, raising their thumbs, confirmed that their interpreter spoke the truth.

Despite the objections of the old warriors, the Grand Prince of Kiev Mstislav Romanovich ordered all weapons surrendered to the Tatars. Then the Kievan warriors took to bidding one another farewell, bowing low, and exited one by one, throwing their arms into one pile. Then they

made a mad dash for the river — they had drunk no water in three days. When the last warriors had left the camp and started along the high road in the dust, stretching their shoulders and rejoicing that they would see their homeland, the Tatars descended upon them and began slaughtering them mercilessly.

Now in the vast barren steppe, without arms, death seemed inevitable. Russia was far away, and there was nowhere to turn for help!

The Mongols singled out the eleven princes who had been fighting together with the Prince of Kiev and invited them to join Khan Sabutai Bahadar in a feast. Horsemen surrounded them in a tight circle and led them to the Tatar camp.

With one hundred bodyguards Sabutai Bahadar had moved to one side of the Kievan camp to watch the carnage. The disarmed Uruses fought however they could, throwing rocks and clumps of dry earth. The wounded grappled with the Tatars, pulling them from their saddles, wresting their curved sabres and fighting on. One tall Urus who had brought a shaft from the camp, used it as a club. He tried to whack an approaching horseman, but the blow landed on the horse's head. The horse reared and fell along with its rider. The Urus threw himself on the prostrate Mongol, wrested his sabre, killed him and leaped on the horse, all the while continuing to brandish the sabre... Then a cloud of dust shrouded everything...

But the forces were unequal, and the Mongols were gaining the upper hand.

Sabutai Bahadar ascended a hill and continued to observe the movements of the horsemen along the high road; he was the first to notice three clouds of dust moving from the north.

"What is that?" asked Sabutai, pointing to the north.

"Those are the Mongols of Tohuchar returning!" said the bodyguards. "Those are the Kipchaks driving the bulls!"

"No, it is a fresh force!" said Sabutai. "Sound the alarm! Summon all soldiers at once! They've pulled the boots off plenty a dead Urus now! There's going to be a new battle!"

The trumpets sounded shrilly. In several places where scuffling was going on, other Mongol trumpeteers

answered with signals. Some of the Mongol horsemen, leaving the road where the Russians were still fighting back, raced at a gallop to the hill. The five-tailed bunchuk of Sabutai could be seen there, as could the commander himself, motionless on his steed, like a stone idol.

While from the north, out of the steppe, the three clouds of dust moved ever closer. Then the dust clouds left the ground, drifted through the air and slowly dispersed. Sabutai looked in that direction in silence. His bodyguards said in a near-whisper:

"Three detachments are coming. Who are they? If not Kipchaks, then those are Urus horsemen. There up ahead are rushes. They are moving across the marsh — that is why the dust has settled... Look, there they are!"

On the fields this side of the rushes, amidst a thick growth of willow-shrubs, the first warriors on white and bay horses came into sight. Appearing from all directions like a bolt from the blue, groups of horsemen grew denser and denser and soon filled the plain.

For some time the horsemen remained calmly in place — they seemed to be putting their ranks in order. Then the horsemen spread out in a half-circle, and three triangular standards came into view — black and gold in the middle and a red one on either side.

The Tatars who were slaughtering the disarmed Kievans on the high road were surrounded by thick dust and therefore did not notice the arrival of a new troop for some time. The scuffling continued, moving gradually west toward the Dnieper...

All at once the center of the newly-arrived troop charged ahead with a deafening cry, heading into the very heart of the battle.

The right wing broke off and galloped ahead, to the west, encompassing the fighting men, while the left wing set out slowly for the very hill where Sabutai Bahadar stood, accelerating their pace as they went.

The old commander hesitated for but a split second. He cried, "Follow me!" With a crack of his whip he swiftly descended the hill on his ambler and dashed off in the direction of Tohuchar's troops. There he found no one — Tohuchar had participated in the battle — and Sabutai raced on.

But the Russians did not pursue him. They made a

half-circle and galloped off in a cloud of dust to save the Kievans retreating to the Dnieper.

Sabutai stopped, dispatching messengers to summon the Mongol troops scattered along the high road back to the banks of the river Kalka.

"So far the victory is ours," said the old commander. "But the Uruses are a prolific, stubborn tribe! Yet another Urus army could appear out of the steppes and cut off our retreat home... It is time to turn our steeds around!"

Chepe Noyon, at the head of three hundred men, galloped to the Dnieper without respite, changing horses along the way. The roamer Ploskinya, accompanying him as an interpreter, inquired of the wounded Russians, "Where is Mstislav Udatny?"

Some replied that they had seen him flying like the wind on a fiendish grey horse.

On the bank of the Dnieper Chepe caught sight of a black boat sailing away; in it he saw the scarlet cape of Mstislav. The prince sat in the stern holding the reins of his steed swimming behind the boat. Mstislav's gilded helmet shone brightly in the rays of the evening sun, but the prince himself did not look back at the "evil bank" he had left behind.

Chepe put on his finest arrow and stretched his taut bow. The arrow fell short of the boat, entering the water with a splash. Chepe leapt from his horse, fell flat on the ground, and clasping his head in his hands, gnawed at the dry yellowed grass in rage...

He rose, glanced once again at the fading boat and the scarlet cape, and, not knowing on whom to vent his fury, grabbed his curved sabre and hacked to pieces the shackled roamer Ploskinya, who was of no use to him now.

Chepe jumped onto his bay horse, and turning to the steppe, galloped back, away from the high road, along which thousands of men moved and the final skirmishes continued amidst clouds of black dust.

Many glorious Russian warriors were killed in the battle at the Kalka and on the road across the steppe. They fell while trying to rescue the disarmed Kievan

warriors, slaughtered by the Tatars who had sworn to bring no harm to the surrendered Uruses. Russian people shall not forget those who laid down their lives in that battle — the Rostov warrior Alyosha Popovich and his faithful shield-bearer Torop; the Ryazan warrior Dobrynya the Golden Belt; Alyosha's young aid, the glorious Yekim Ivanovich, and other brave northern soldiers of Suzdal, Murom, Ryazan and Pronsk.¹

The Russian detachments that did not surrender their arms and bravely broke through the Mongol lines, reached the Dnieper, and here boats awaited them to transport them to the opposite bank. Those who had succumbed to the Tatar persuasions and thrown down their axes and swords were nearly all killed, as the old song says:

*For the grey wolves to gnaw in exaltation,
For the ravens black to caw in celebration...*

And so, it was through the fault of the short-sighted, envious princes who fought among themselves and did not wish to unite their forces into one firmly welded Russian army that the road across the steppe became a road of sorrow and tears, and not one of great victory: the glorious Russian warriors sowed it with their bones of white, watered it with their blood of scarlet.

¹In the winter of 1223, in the lands of Suzdal, in glorious Rostov, a convention of warriors in the service of various princes was held. Everyone said that there was great disorder in Russia, that the princes could not get along with one another and, to the delight of their bellicose neighbors, in these internecine wars the princes drove their warriors and peasant men to kill one another.

At this convention the warriors made an agreement to go one and all to Kiev, the mother of Russian cities, where they would serve the Grand Prince of Kiev alone. After the convention the warriors left the Suzdal lands and headed south toward Kiev.

When already en route they heard that all the southern princes along with the Prince of Kiev had marched toward the Blue Sea (the Sea of Azov) in a campaign against the Tatar Khan Jenghiz, the entire troop turned off the main road toward the southern steppes and headed down little-traveled roads to join up with the Russian army which had gone ahead.

The northern warriors arrived on that bloody day when the Tatars, having deceived the Kievan warriors into giving up their arms, began slaughtering them.

Many of the northern warriors were killed in battle with the Tatars, but they gave the Russian army a chance to regroup, and, by successfully repelling the Tatar onslaught, to make their way to the Dnieper.

Chapter Fifteen

THE TATAR FEAST ON BONES

...While the captive princes they placed beneath boards upon which they themselves sat down to feast. And thus the princes met their death.

*The Trinity Chronicle*¹

On the bank of the Kalka, on a tall burial mound, Sabutai Bahadar summoned all the commanders of thousands and hundreds for a solemn prayer to the god of war Sulde. This was done at the demand of the sullen, shaggy-haired shaman Beki. In a pointed cap, with a bearskin draped over his shoulders, hung with knives, dolls and rattles, the old wizard beat a large tambourine with a beetle and danced in a circle around the bound Mstislav Romanovich and the other eleven gullible princes.

Shaking their heads and sighing, the Tatars looked them over and regretted that the Prince Mastislab was not among them, for they had so wished to have a look at the famed "Russian Chepe"...

The shaman Beki cried out prayers and, holding the tambourine to his hairy face, he whistled like a thrush, then hooted like an owl, roared like a bear, or howled like a wolf — this was how he conversed with the mighty god of war Sulde, who had granted the Mongols another victory.

"Do you hear the wrath of the god Sulde?" wailed the shaman. "Sulde is hungry again. He demands human sacrifice!.."

Thousands of Tatar warriors encamped on the plain around the barrow. They built fires and took to slaughtering young mares.

The Tatars brought forth shafts and boards torn off Russian wagons and piled them on top of the bound princes. Three hundred Tatar military leaders sat down on these boards. Raising their cups of koumiss, they praised the menacing god of war Sulde, the patron of the

¹*The Trinity Chronicle* (15th century) — one of the most important old-Russian chronicles. — *Tr.*

Mongols, and glorified the invincible conqueror of the universe, the red-bearded Jenghiz Khan. Having refused the money offered to buy back the distinguished Russian princes, the Tatars sacrificed to the god Sulde these prisoners who had dared engage in battle the troops of him who was "sent from the skies", Jenghiz Khan. The warriors roared with laughter every time moans and curses came from the princes pinned beneath the boards. The moans and cries eventually died down and were drowned out by the triumphant song of the Mongol soldiers:

*We do recall
The Mongol steppe,
The blue Kerulen,
The golden Onon!
So many,
So many
Tribes unruly
Lie trampled in dust
By our Mongol troops.*

*Menace and fire
We bring on nations,
Brandishing death
Are Jenghiz Khan's sons.
The sands of forty
Deserts behind us
Are stained by the blood
Of the slain...*

Tohuchar Noyon rose during the feast and whistled a signal summoning the archers during a battue. Everyone fell quiet upon hearing the familiar call. Tohuchar stood and began shouting to the warriors:

"The great kagan Jenghiz Khan is the wisest of all men! He foresees all by a hundred days and by a thousand years... He sent me after you with a tumen of brave warriors to find the invincible tigers, Chepe Noyon and Sabutai Bahadar. The kagan told me that the finest gift he could make you would be to send support on the battle day..."

"True, true!" cried the Mongols.

"Stopping nowhere, we crossed many different countries. Everywhere we saw traces of the indestructible Mongols. We asked, "Where are the glorious Chepe and Sabutai?" The local people, falling to their knees in fear, would point to the west. We arrived here before the battle commenced, and my ten thousand men plunged into it... Having united with you, we quickly routed the long-bearded Uruses..."

"Glory to you, Tohuchar! You arrived in good time!"

Tohuchar went on:

"The great sovereign of the world Jenghiz Khan gave thought to you and sent his will through me... A special messenger delivered his sacred letter. Ten thousand of my men guarded him as they would a precious diamond, and delivered him here unharmed. Look, there he is!"

A bow-legged old Mongol, hung with bells and wearing a hat with falcon feathers, approached Sabutai Bahadar. He elicited a leather tube from his bosom. It contained a sealed scroll. With gnarled fingers Sabutai tore off the wax seal. A grey-bearded scribe in a Muslim turban unrolled the scroll, read to himself what was written, and whispered the contents into Sabutai's ear. The latter rose and exclaimed, "The great kagan commands! Listen in reverence!"

All the commanders rose at once. Upon seeing this, the rest of the Tatars jumped to their feet. The commanders then fell to the ground, and all the soldiers in the camp followed suit. Raising their heads they cried, "The great kagan orders! We obey!"

Sabutai Bahadar continued:

"The invincible one and only has inscribed these words:

" 'When you receive this letter, turn your horses around. Come to the council to discuss the conquest of the universe.

" 'God is in the sky, the kagan is god's power on earth. The seal of the ruler of the planets' junction, the sovereign of all peoples.' "

Sabutai's gaze swept over the backs of the Mongols bowed to the ground, and he raised his hand.

"Now I shall speak!.. Listen to me!"

Still kneeling, all the men straightened up and listened with bated breath to the "leopard with the gnawed-off paw".

"Today we will continue to make merry, but tomorrow at sunrise we will all head back to the golden yurt of our sovereign. He who tarries will be strangled!"

All the warriors howled for joy and, taking their seats once again, they resumed the feast with shouts and songs.

The morning of the following day, having performed a prayer and the offering of koumiss to the sun, the Mongols mounted their steeds. They drove herds of cattle and tattered, emaciated prisoners. Ox-driven carts with the plundered loot and the seriously wounded Mongols creaked unbearably all across the steppe and vanished in clouds of dust. At the head of the Mongol army rode Sabutai Bahadar. He carried in a sack the head of the Prince of Kiev Mstislav Romanovich, his gilded helmet and gold cross on a chain. Sabutai's scarred and dirt-encrusted face twisted into something like a smile at the thought of how he would lay down his precious sack before the gold throne of the conqueror of the universe, the invincible Jenghiz Khan.

At the rear of the army rode the sullen Chepe with his hundred scouts. He had no prizes and sang a slow song, as plaintive as the howl of the wind, about the blue Kerulen, the golden Onon and the vast Mongol steppe...

The Mongols headed to the north-east, to the river Itil (the Volga) and onward across the southern spurs of the Urals to the plains of Khorezm. The Kipchak steppe was thereby rid of the menacing Tatar army. They disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as they had come. After their departure some of the Kipchak tribes returned to their ravaged nomad camps, others drifted to the Ugr steppe and the lower reaches of the Danube. Then the Kipchak and Russian princes thought the Tatars would never return, and they passed day after day in their old quarrels and strife, making no preparations for a new war and harboring not the slightest suspicions that the Tatars were planning a new, even more terrible raid on the west...

Part Four

THE END OF JENGHIZ KHAN

Chapter One

JENGHIZ KHAN ORDERS THE HORSES HOME

After the brave flight of Sultan Jelal ed-Din, Jenghiz Khan sent his tested commanders Bal Noyon and Durbai Bahadar to Indian lands in pursuit of the sultan. They galloped along various roads, but were unable to find any trace of him. The Mongols wreaked havoc along the way, burning down cities which belonged to Jelal ed-Din's allies, the khans Agrak and Azam Melik.

The Mongols built rafts, loaded them with catapults and round boulders suitable for hurling and sent them down the river Sindh to the city of Multan. Here they took to bombarding the wealthy city from their rock-hurling machines. The invulnerable walls, the continuous influx of fresh Indian reserves and the unbearable heat compelled the Mongols, dressed in sheepskins to lift the siege and return to the mountains and Jenghiz Khan.

The great kagan found refuge from the heat among high mountain ranges, in a settlement enveloped in clouds, and here he seemed to forget military affairs altogether. At evening feasts Jenghiz Khan listened to storytellers and singers of Persian and Chinese songs. New dancers, just arrived after two years' journey from the Chinese capital, dressed up in silken garb the color of gold, pranced about on dark purple Afghan rugs. They demonstrated the art of dance, waving their long arms, imitating a broad-winged bird in flight, or, curling into a ball, they would unfurl like snakes and circle in round dances.

It was here that Jenghiz Khan's small son Kyulkan and his young mother Kulan-Khatun fell ill: both lay on silk pillows covered with furs and complained in turn of chills and fever. Jenghiz Khan visited them every day, put pieces of sugar in their mouths, sat by their sides and asked, "Where does it hurt today?"

Kulan-Khatun cried and complained of pain throughout her body.

"It is the spirits of these mountains tormenting those who remain in this evil place," she said. "Have you seen the fog which rises from the depths of these canyons? It is the souls of infants killed by your army. Little Kyulkan and I shall die here. Only water from the blue Kerulen will cure us. Let us go back to our Mongol steppes."

Jenghiz Khan grew angry.

"Without me you shall go nowhere. And before I go I must conquer the other half of the universe."

Kulan-Khatun cried even harder. Jenghiz Khan summoned his great advisor, the Chinaman Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai. The latter arrived at once with a large book in hand. When she saw him, Kulan-Khatun jumped up, grabbed the book, threw it on the rug and lay down on top of it.

"Now we shall learn what the skies say!" said Jenghiz Khan.

"I do not wish to know what will become of me," Kulan replied. "Everything will be as I wish it. And I wish to return to the banks of the Kerulen, and everyone in our army wishes the same..."

Jenghiz Khan raised and lowered his brows, snorted, and said at last:

"There has been no enemy yet that I have failed to vanquish. Now I wish to conquer death. As long as you, carefree and wilful Kulan-Khatun, are by my side, death will not touch you. If you leave me, a discreetly poisoned dish or an arrow shot from the dark will take you away beyond the clouds..." Then Jenghiz Khan turned to Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai, the wisest of his advisors. "You promised to bring me shamans, wizards, medicine men and sages capable of preparing an elixir that provides immortality. Why do I still not see them?"

"Trustworthy people have been sent to fetch them, and they should be returning here soon. But you move with your army so far and so fast that all these knowledgeable men cannot catch up with you..."

Jenghiz Khan watched Kulan-Khatun's condition deteriorate, her blossoming beauty fade. Her small son Kyulkan also continued to lie at his mother's side, pale and thin. Then the kagan grew anxious, finding comfort in nothing. He spoke often of death and asked the medicine men for a means of prolonging life. Many offered

wonder potions. Jenghiz Khan would order these medicine men to drink their own remedies, then cut off their heads to see if they would continue to live.

Jenghiz Khan grew particularly despondent after the Mongols' battle at the fortress Baltan, when an enemy catapult landed an arrow as big as a spear into Mutugan, the son of Jagatai and Jenghiz Khan's favorite grandson. Mutugan had been destined to become the principal khan of Muslim lands, but had instead been killed by a random arrow.

Then Jenghiz Khan concluded that death deals blows as a blind she-camel kicks: one she hits and he gives up the ghost, another she misses and he lives till old age.

Jenghiz Khan grew so furious over his grandson's death that he ordered Baltan taken at once. Breaking down the wall, the army stormed into the city and rendered everything to waste. Jenghiz Khan ordered the warriors to take no prisoners; he turned the entire area into a desert where not a single creature lived. This place was given the name Mau Kurgan, which means hill of sorrow. To this day no one has reoccupied these lands, and they remain untilled.

Jenghiz Khan would spend whole days sitting by his yellow tent, erected on a mountain summit over a cliff. Dark and seemingly bottomless canyons yawned below. He saw the sombre mountain ranges and snow-capped peaks, stretching into the foggy distance; sometimes he summoned experienced guides and asked them about the shortest routes across India and Tibet to the Mongol steppes.

In the camp, the warriors, loaded down with lavish spoils, spoke only of returning to their home pastures. But no one dared make this known to the formidable kagan. No one knew his true thoughts, no one could predict what his will might be the next day — would he turn the army homeward, or would he march again, and would they have to wander strange countries for years to come, exterminating peoples they met amidst the smoke of fires?

Grumbling was also to be heard among the troops over the long stop in the canyons of the Afghan mountains, where there was not enough feed for the horses. Then Kulan-Khatun, in an effort to persuade the kagan that it

was time to return home, exchanged whispers with the great Chinese counselor and advisor Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai and thought up a tale. Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai instructed two brave nukers to tell the tale to Jenghiz Khan. The two Mongols came to the command post and demanded a meeting with Jenghiz Khan, saying they had something extremely important and fantastical to tell him.

Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai brought them to Jenghiz Khan, and they told him this:

"Having lost our way in the mountains, we saw a beast which bore some resemblance to a deer, though it was green, had a horse's tail and one horn. This beast shouted to us in Mongolian, 'Your khan must return to his native lands in good time.' "

Jenghiz Khan listened calmly, but raised one brow and stared fixedly at the warriors kneeling before him.

"On the day when this marvelous beast appeared before you, had you drunk much koumiss?"

The warriors swore that they would have been glad to drink it, but amidst these barren cliffs not only mare's milk, but even goat's milk was hard to come by, and to prove the truth of their words they held up their thumbs.

Jenghiz Khan turned to Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai. "You know the wise books in which all the secrets of the earth, sea and sky are revealed. Have you ever read of such a beast?"

Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai brought a large book with drawings and illustrations of various animals, fish and birds of the universe, leafed through it and said:

"This rare beast is called Wise Go-Duan, and it understands the languages of all peoples. The words it spoke to our two warriors mean that excessive bloodshed is taking place in the world. Your great army has been conquering the western lands for four years now. Therefore the great eternal skies, repulsed by the continuous killing, sent the beast Go-Duan to announce to you, master, its will. Show your submission to the skies and have mercy on the inhabitants of these lands. This will mean eternal happiness for you, otherwise the skies will grow angry and strike you with lightning. Such is the explanation given by this ancient book of Chinese sages."

Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai spoke with the solemnity and importance of a high priest reading a prayer, while Jenghiz

Khan, one eye screwed up, stared at his counselor. Then he turned his gaze to the warriors kneeling before him humbly, and called first one then the other to come closer. Bending over, he whispered something in their ear, and each, in turn, answered him in a whisper.

Then the kagan, quite pleased, gave the warriors permission to leave and ordered koumiss for them — as much as they could drink.

“These warriors are sharp and inventive,” said the kagan to his advisor. “They deserve to be exalted. I asked each in turn about the step of the beast Go-Duan. One said that it ran at a trot; the other, that it ambled. No Mongol, no matter how drunk, would make such an error after seeing a beast in flight. But I have realized today that the army is tired of fighting, the men yearn ever harder for their native steppes, and therefore I hereby announce that, in accordance with the will of the skies, which sent the marvelous beast Go-Duan to me, its chosen one, I am turning back and heading for the native heartland.”¹

The next day, having learned of Jenghiz Khan’s decision, all the Mongol warriors rejoiced, sang songs and prepared to march.

At first Jenghiz Khan planned to move across India and Tibet, and with this in mind sent a mission to Delhi, to the Indian King Iltutmysh. But the trail across the mountains was still covered with snow, and the king delayed with his answer, drawing up forces, in command of which he placed Jelal ed-Din.

In the meantime, reports came from Mongolia of a new uprising of the ever rebellious Tanguts, and a reading of the stars by his counselor Yeh-lü Ch’u-ts’ai, as well as predictions of the shamans advised the kagan against moving across India.

Then Jenghiz Khan decided to go back by the same long route along which he had come. At his orders the local inhabitants began clearing the mountain passes of snow, and with the onset of spring the Mongol army set out.

¹*Native heartland* — the principal territory of all those which comprised Jenghiz Khan’s empire. It was made up of purely Mongol nomadic camps.

Chapter Two

JENGHIZ KHAN'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE WISE ASCETIC

Back during their stop in the upper reaches of the Black Irtysh, Jenghiz Khan, obsessed with his health and prolonging his life, sought experienced physicians. He was told of one remarkable sage by the name of Ch'ang Ch'un, who was supposed to have discovered all the secrets of the earth and skies and even to know a means of becoming immortal. The great counselor and astrologer Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai said of him:

"Ch'ang Ch'un is a man of high achievement. This old man has long possessed the gift of associating with the clouds, flying to them on cranes, and can turn into other creatures. Denying himself all worldly pleasures, he lives in the mountains along with other sages, searching for the philosophical stone, which brings man long life and immortality. Absorbed in thought, he might sit still like a corpse, stand motionless for days like a tree, speak like thunder, or tread lightly like the wind. He has seen much, heard much, and there is no book he has not read."

In order to seek out this incredible old man, Jenghiz Khan ordered his tested dignitary Lu Chun Lu dispatched at once. He gave him a gold paitza with the image of a ferocious tiger and the inscription: "Granted full authority of command, as if we ourselves were traveling."

As with the most precious of treasures, Lu Chun Lu was entrusted with a personal letter from Jenghiz Khan to the sage Ch'ang Ch'un, dictated from the words of the illiterate kagan by his counselor Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai. The letter read as follows:

"The skies forsook China for its excessive luxury and haughtiness. I, inhabitant of the northern steppes, possess no licentious inclinations. I love simplicity and moral purity, forsake luxury and observe moderation. I have always but one canvas dress and identical food. I wear the same rags as do the groomers and I eat as simply as a cow.

"In seven years I have performed great deeds, and I have established my rule in all the countries on earth. There has not been such a kingdom since ancient times,

when our ancestors, the nomadic tribes of Hun, conquered the world.

"My title is a great one, my duties important. But I fear that there is something lacking in my rule. If a vessel is built, oars are made to help cross rivers. Likewise, sages are called upon and assistants are chosen for the conquest and ruling of the universe.

"I have learned that you, teacher, have become one with truth and act always according to lofty rules. Learned and experienced, you have come to know the laws thoroughly. You have been in the rocky canyons for long time, concealing yourself from the world.

"But what am I to do? On account of the vastness of the mountains and valleys dividing us I cannot meet with you. Therefore I have chosen my personal dignitary Lu Chun Lu, prepared swift horsemen and a mail carriage and I beseech you, teacher, to fear not the many thousand *li*¹ and come to me.

"Think not of the distance and dimensions of the sandy steppes, but take pity on my people. Or, out of charity for me, inform me of the means for prolonging life.

"I hope that you, having learned the essence of the great *dao*², sympathize with all that is good and will not oppose my wishes. Thus our current will should be perfectly clear to you."

With this letter in hand Lu Chun Lu set out on a long journey across mountain and steppe. He flew, making haste to carry out the kagan's will, quickly changing horses at the stations. At last, having reached China, he made his way to the high mountains, where in a remote canyon he found the old sage, emaciated and scantily clothed in threadbare rags. This was the famed Ch'ang Ch'un. Having read Jenghiz Khan's letter, he first flatly refused to go to him.

Then he wrote a reply, which Lu Chun Lu sent to the great kagan by special messenger, while he himself remained near the ascetic, fearing the kagan's wrath and still hoping to persuade Ch'ang Ch'un. The Chinese sage wrote as follows:

"The humble dweller of the mountains Ch'ang Ch'un,

¹*Li* — a Chinese unit of linear measure, approximately half a kilometer.

²*Dao* — the highest truth.

striving toward *dao*, recently received the order of the sovereign sent from afar. Yes, the whole of the worthless coastal Chinese nation is foolish for its haughtiness. As I see it, in the affairs of the world I am incompetent, as for my studies of the *dao* I have not excelled in the least; I have labored in all possible ways, have not died but grown old, and though my renown has spread throughout various states, in holiness I am no better than ordinary men — for all this I am merely tormented by shame. For who can know one's secret thoughts?

"Having received this extraordinary letter, at first I wanted to hide in the mountains or go away to the sea, but then I chose not to oppose your will and deemed it necessary to set out on this journey and fight the snows in order to appear before a sovereign to whom the skies have granted courage and wisdom and superiority over all who preceded him in antiquity, so that scholarly Chinamen and savage barbarians alike obey him.

"Wind and dust are the constant companions of travel, the skies are darkened by clouds; I am old and weak, I cannot endure great hardships and fear that I shall be unable to survive the long journey required to reach you.

"If I do not come to you, sovereign of peoples, is it in my power to decide affairs of state and war? Therefore I humbly beseech you to inform me whether I am to go or not. I am withered in appearance, my body wasted.

"I await your decision.

"In the Year of the Dragon, the third moon."

Jenghiz Khan was very glad when he received this letter, rewarded the messenger generously and answered with a new letter:

"He who comes under my hand is with me. He who leaves me is against me. I employ military might so that in time, after great efforts, lasting peace will be achieved. I will stop only when all the hearts in the universe submit to me. With this goal I demonstrate menacing grandeur, being always on the march among invincible warriors. I know that you can easily set out on this journey and fly here on a crane. Though the plains along the road are vast, I have not long to wait before I see your staff. Therefore I reply to your message that my thoughts might be clear to you. Of other matters I shall not speak."

Chapter Three

MAKE ME IMMORTAL!

Upon receiving the great kagan's second letter, the Chinese sage agreed to set out on the long journey. He flatly refused to ride in the caravan along with the lovely court singers and dancers which were being sent from China to Jenghiz Khan at the same time. Therefore he was given a special guard of one thousand foot and three hundred cavalry soldiers. Ch'ang Ch'un took twenty of his pupils along with him; one of them kept a detailed diary, recording the teacher's sayings and verse.¹

Ch'ang Ch'un rode without haste, stopping in towns everywhere. The Mongol town rulers prepared grand receptions in his honor and offered him all kinds of lavish food, which the sage refused, eating only boiled rice and fruit.

Ch'ang Ch'un wrote verse incessantly along the way. As he rode across the Mongol steppes, he expounded his thoughts in the following lines:

*Wherever the eyes may turn,
There is no end to the mountains.
Torrents rush down their flanks,
The winds move in infinite space!*

*My thoughts are singing a song:
"Since time began on Earth,
Endlessly, tribes of nomads
Have passed this way.*

*As in days of old, they eat
The forbidden flesh of cattle.
Not ours their strange attire,
Not ours their strange custom.*

*They have no knowledge of writing,
They are simple-hearted as children.
Their days flow free from care,
They are content with their lot!"*

¹This diary of Ch'ang Ch'un's journey — *Travels to the West* — has been preserved to this day.

*The road crossed a desert plain
And every step was an effort.
The lakes were glassy blue,
The salt flats gleamed.*

*No traveler is seen all day
Among these voiceless hills...
The stranger from foreign strands rides through
Hurriedly, once in a year, like a shade.*

*No mountain, nor tree will meet the eye,
The hills are covered with grass...
Come summer, come winter, the nomad
always wears
His clumsy attire of fur.*

*Here no rice grows, here all the people
Nourish themselves on milk,
And cheerily each takes with him
His flimsy home of felt.*

Two years after the day of his departure, Ch'ang Ch'un reached the river Jaihun and crossed it near Termez. Here he was met by Jenghiz Khan's personal physician. The sage presented him with his verse, written to mark the end of the long journey, and said:

"I am a mountain savage. I have come to the military camp of the great kagan only so that I might tell him important words. Their fulfillment will bring happiness to the universe."

Ch'ang Ch'un's verse read as follows:

*The Eighth Moon has been famed for its light
Ever since ancient times!
The clouds have dispersed,
The wind has dropped,
The night is clear.
A silver bridge is thrown
Across the firmament,
And in the South
The dragons*

*Play in the starlight!
From lofty towers
Is borne a joyous pealing of bells,
All celebrate this festival
As is ordained by law!
Wine flows,
The singer performs his songs...
But the weary sage
Wanders along the peaceful shore...
He wends his fearless way
To the mighty khan,
That the gory demon might be placated
And allow respite.*

Having passed through the vacant city of Balkh, where only the howling of hungry dogs could be heard, since all its inhabitants had fled, Ch'ang Ch'un spent four more days on a mountain road before reaching the camp of Jenghiz Khan and his yellow tent, rising above a steep cliff.

Accompanied by the vicegerent of Samarkand, Akhaiya Taishi, who knew both Chinese and Mongolian, Ch'ang Ch'un appeared before the awe-inspiring sovereign. Since all "seekers of truth" who appeared before the Chinese sovereign never knelt or prostrated themselves, Ch'ang Ch'un likewise remained standing when he entered the yurt; he merely bowed and folded his hands as a sign of respect.

Before the great kagan stood a bronze-colored, withered old man, scorched by sun and wind, with a bulging forehead and tufts of white hair on the back of his head. He seemed a pauper in his rope sandals on bare feet and threadbare cloak, but he looked calmly and fearlessly at the "ruler of the universe", then lowered himself to the carpet.

Jenghiz Khan, dark-faced with a grey-streaked red beard, in a round hat of black lacquer with a large emerald and three fox tails dangling down upon his shoulders, sat on a gold throne with his legs drawn up. He stared with unblinking, greenish, cat-like eyes at the old sage, feeble and poor, from whom he now awaited salvation. Like his guest, Jenghiz Khan was dressed in plain black canvas, and his beard was similarly covered with the white frost of old age; their paths, however, had differed.

The Chinese sage had secluded himself from people in uninhabited places, had devoted his entire life to the study of sciences, seeking a universal remedy for illness, suffering, age and death, and rendered aid to all who came to him with a plea. The kagan, on the contrary, had always been the leader of enormous armies, had sent soldiers to exterminate other peoples — all his victories had been achieved through the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Now that life's final years were upon him, Jenghiz Khan depended on this emaciated recluse to return to him his youth and strength, that he might be forever rid of death's tenacious fingers, death which pursued the kagan and sought to turn him, the most powerful man on earth, to ashes and nonexistence.

The two old men remained silent for some time. Then Jenghiz Khan asked, "Your journey, was it safe? Did you have enough of everything in the cities where you stopped?"

"At first I was provided with all kinds of food in abundance," Ch'ang Ch'un replied. "But toward the end, when I crossed the lands where your army had passed, everywhere I found fresh traces of battles and fires. There it was difficult to find food enough."

"Now you shall have everything you wish. Come to me daily for supper."

"No, I need not such charity! A mountain savage lives as a recluse and likes solitude."

Servants brought koumiss, but the sage refused it. The kagan said, "You are free to live here as you wish. We shall summon you for a special talk. We now grant you permission to go."

Ch'ang Ch'un rose, folded his hands, waved them in a sign of respect and left.

Soon the Mongol army set out north once again, across the lands of Mavera-un-Nahr. On several occasions during the journey Jenghiz Khan sent the sage grape wine, melons and various foods.

The army swiftly crossed the river Jaihun by means of a pontoon bridge constructed skillfully of boats, and headed in the direction of Samarkand.

Once during a stop Jenghiz Khan sent Ch'ang Ch'un a notice that he would be awaiting him late that night for an important talk.

When the noise of the camp began to die down and the croaking of frogs grew more audible, Akhaiya Taishi escorted the sage Ch'ang Ch'un past the motionless sentries to the yellow tent of the great kagan.

Thick wax candles in tall silver candlesticks burned on either side of the gold throne. Jenghiz Khan sat, his legs pulled up, on a white felt cloth; his round lacquer hat with the black fox tails cast a shadow over his face, so that only his eyes shone, like those of a tiger. Two secretaries who knew both Mongolian and Chinese sat near him on the carpet.

Ch'ang Ch'un lowered himself to the carpet before the throne and said:

"I am a savage of the mountains and have been practising *dao* — teachings on the most beautiful and lofty — for many years now. I like to stay only in very remote and quiet places, to roam the desert or stand there, pondering. Here near your tent there is continuous noise from the multitude of warriors, their horses and carts. Because of this my spirit is disquieted. Therefore, may I not be granted permission to ride as I please, either in front of or behind your procession? This will be a great kindness for a mountain savage."

"As you wish, so shall it be," the kagan replied. Then he said, "Explain to me, what is thunder? Is it true what I am told by the wizards and the head shaman Beki that thunder is the roaring of the gods who live in the skies beyond the clouds when they are angry at men? And they grow angry when men sacrifice not black animals, as is proper, but animals of another color. Is this true?"

"The skies grow angry at men not for their offerings, be they abundant or scant," Ch'ang Ch'un replied. "Nor do the skies grow angry when sacrifices are made not of black sheep or horses, but of red, piebald or white ones. I have heard other erroneous words from your shamans to the effect that in summertime men must not bathe in rivers or wash their clothes in water, roll felt mats or gather mushrooms — that all these things anger the skies, which send thunder and lightning to earth... Men's disrespect for the skies lies not here, but rather in the fact that men commit many crimes... I, a mountain savage, have read in ancient books that of the three thousand various crimes of man the most vile one is disrespect for

one's parents... I have noticed many times in this journey that your subjects do not show enough respect for their parents: they gorge themselves at feasts while their fathers, mothers and grandfathers are dying of hunger. And because heartless sons and daughters offend their parents, the righteous skies wreak their fury against men, punishing them with lightning and thunder. Take care, Great Kagan, to enlighten your people and set them right."

"The sage speaks sensibly!" Jenghiz Khan observed and ordered the scribes to record Ch'ang Ch'un's words in Mongolian, Chinese and Turkish, in order that a special law concerning respect for one's parents might be made public.¹

When a variety of dishes were served on gold platters, and Ch'ang Ch'un took but a handful of boiled rice and a few raisins, the kagan asked, "Holy sage! I have wished to ask you for some time now: have you not a medicine to make an old man young, to pour new strength into a weak body? Can you not make it so that the days of my life flow incessantly, always, knowing no end, just as the waters of a great river flow perpetually? Have you not a medicine to make a man immortal?"

Ch'ang Ch'un lowered his gaze and pressed his fingertips together in silence.

"If you have no such medicine now," Jenghiz Khan continued, "perhaps you know how to prepare it? Or you will indicate another sage or wizard who knows the secret of how to become immortal? If you prepare such a medicine for me, that I might live forever, I will give you an extraordinary, unheard-of reward: I will make you a prince and the ruler of a large district... I will give you a saddle bag full of gold coins... I will give you a hundred of the most beautiful maidens from different countries!"

Ch'ang Ch'un did not say anything in reply or raise his eyes, but began to tremble as if from a strong chill. The kagan went on tempting him:

"I'll erect a palace of uncommon beauty on your mountain, one that only a Chinese emperor might have, and there in that marvelous palace you shall dwell on your lofty thoughts... I need not have youth even. Let me remain as old and grey as I am now, but I want years

¹Such a law was included in the *Yasa*.

without end in which to bear on my shoulders the great Mongol state I have built with my own hands..."

The kagan fell silent and peered into the sage's gaunt face with relentless burning eyes. The sage squirmed and, casting a sidelong glance at the awe-inspiring kagan, began softly:

"What use have I for gold when I love mountains, quiet and contemplation? Am I capable of governing an entire district when I cannot even govern myself? Give all the fair maidens in marriage to gallant youths. I need not a palace — I can engage in my contemplations while standing on a rock... I have studied all the wisest of books ever written by the most famous Chinese scholars, and there are no more secrets for me. I can tell you a certain truth: there are many potions for increasing a man's strength, curing his ailments and guarding his life, but there is not and has never been a medicine that can make him immortal."

Jenghiz Khan grew pensive and, bowing his head, remained silent for some time. The scribes who were recording the words of the conversation stopped scratching their reed pens. Only the crackling of the wax candles could be heard. At last the kagan said:

"Our old men have a saying, 'He who speaks the truth dies not of illness.' Someone will kill the honest man before his time... This is why all men try to make mountains of lies... But you, wise old man, who have traveled ten thousand *li* in order to see me, you alone were not afraid to tell the truth — that there is no means of becoming immortal! You are honest and direct. If you have a request, speak up! I promise to fulfill it."

Ch'ang Ch'un pressed his palms together and bowed before the kagan.

"I have but one request, and I have come here across snows, mountains and deserts to say it to you — put an end to your cruel wars and establish peace and goodwill among nations!"

Jenghiz Khan's brows rose, then came together. His face twisted. Breathing heavily, he cried out so loudly that the scribes' reed pens jumped on the paper:

"War is necessary in order to establish peace everywhere!.. It is not without reason that our old men in the steppes teach, 'Only when you have killed your sworn

enemy will tranquility reign far and near.' And I have not yet routed my old enemy the Tangut Khan Burkhan! And the second half of the universe is not yet under my heel... Can I possibly endure this? Although you are a sage, your request is not sensible! Burden us no more with such requests!"

Jenghiz Khan rose slightly and, clenching the arms of his throne, trembling with rage, he hissed, "We grant you permission to go!"

Jenghiz Khan spent the winter of that year near Samarkand. He lived in the Mongol camp, disliking the crowdedness of cities.

First there was a great deal of rain, and traveling along waterlogged roads became difficult. Then it began to snow frequently, and it grew so cold that many horses and bulls froze to death and lay strewn about the roads.

Ch'ang Ch'un the sage lived in the Khorezm Shah's former country residence surrounded by gardens. Here the old man wrote poetry. Hungry villagers who had been robbed by the Mongol warriors of all their property, livestock, wives and children came to him in throngs. Ch'ang Ch'un himself cooked cereal and distributed it among the supplicants along with food he received from Jenghiz Khan.

Chapter Four

THE MONGOLS' RETURN TO THE NATIVE HORDE¹

When Jenghiz Khan, wishing to relocate the site of his camp, ordered the army to move from Samarkand to the river Saihun, he commanded the old queen of Khorezm Turkan-Khatun, Shah Muhammad's mother, the whole of the shah's former harem, and other female prisoners of high birth to line the road the Mongols were to take: they sang in loud voices, mourning the downfall of the state of Khorezm, until all the Mongol warriors had passed.

¹The Mongols considered the Native Horde to be the northeastern part of Mongolia along the rivers Onon and Kerulen, where the clan of Jenghiz Khan lived.

At the start of the Year of the Ram (1223), Jenghiz Khan's camp stood on the right bank of the river Saihun. At Jenghiz Khan's summons, three of his sons, Jagatai, Ugedei and Tule – all but his proud and wilful son Juchi – came here to hold council. With his sons, khans and head commanders, Jenghiz Khan discussed his plan to conquer all western countries right up to the Last Sea over the course of the next thirteen years.

Jenghiz Khan's camp was located amidst abandoned orchards whose former owners had fled. A multitude of wild boars would often come down to these orchards from the nearby mountains in search of food. Jenghiz Khan liked to hunt them on horseback, killing them with a spear or arrows.

During a pursuit on one such occasion his horse stumbled. The khan fell and the horse dashed off. An enormous boar stopped, gazing at Jenghiz Khan lying motionless before it. Then it disappeared slowly into the reeds. The other hunters hastened up and retrieved the horse. The kagan stopped the hunt, and upon his return to camp he summoned the Chinese sage Ch'ang Ch'un, that the latter might tell him if there was any interference from the eternal skies in his falling down before the boar. Ch'ang Ch'un replied:

"We all must guard our lives. The great kagan is in his declining years, and he must do less hunting. The fact that this unclean animal did not dare attack the tremor of the universe as he lay in the marsh – this is a sign that he is under the protection of the skies."

"Give up hunting? No, this advice is impracticable!" replied Jenghiz Khan. "We Mongols are accustomed to hunting and shooting on horseback from our early years, and even old men cannot give up this habit... However, I shall keep your words in my heart."

Jenghiz Khan, wishing to reward Ch'ang Ch'un, ordered a herd of milch cows and one of choice steeds driven in, but the sage did not accept this gift, explaining that he could return to his mountains in China in an ordinary mail cart. Then the sage, following a farewell audience with the kagan, set out for home, accompanied by his twenty pupils and a detachment of warriors. A multitude of Jenghiz Khan's retainers accompanied the old *daos* with jugs of wine and baskets of rare fruits.

Many shed tears at their parting.

In the Year of the Monkey (1224), Jenghiz Khan led his army back to the Mongol steppes.

Just like an old tiger who, having devoured a cow, returns slowly to its lair in the thicket of reeds, its sagging belly swaying, so did Jenghiz Khan's army move slowly, burdened with an enormous loot. Each warrior had several pack horses, camels and bulls. Along with the warriors came herds of sheep and creaky two-wheeled carts, loaded down with clothes, carpets, weaponry, copper dishware and various other things plundered from the Muslims. Women and children — both Mongol and those of other tribes — rode on horses, camels and carts while the prisoners, barefoot, tattered and starved, trudged along in long, almost endless, files.

This whole procession moved without haste, making stops in places with convenient pastures, so that the army passed both summer and winter on the road, leaving in its wake a trail of fallen horses and bulls and the bodies of prisoners who could not endure the hardships of the journey across the parched, rocky plains.

That spring Jenghiz Khan reached his pasture lands on the river Kerulen and ordered his royal yellow tent erected in a nomad camp called Buki-Suchegu. Here he called a conference of all noteworthy khans and outstanding commanders and held an extraordinarily lavish feast, the likes of which the steppe had never seen. Three days after the feast Jenghiz Khan's young wife Kulan-Khatun died. Rumor had it that the kagan's brothers were responsible for her death... But who will ever know the truth?

During the Year of the Chicken (1225), Jenghiz Khan remained in his native pasture lands promulgating his *Yasa*, putting the Mongol people on the "Path of Reason and Prosperity" as the collection of his teachings¹ was called.

¹But insignificant excerpts of this collection have survived.

Chapter Five

JENGHIZ KHAN RESOLVES TO DIE IN A CAMPAIGN

Jenghiz Khan could not remain calm when he heard that the unruly Tanguts were rebelling once again. The great kagan had not forgotten his vow to punish their khan Burkhan. He began preparing for a campaign and sent for his sons, informing them that he would lead the army himself.

Once again, three of his four sons arrived; the eldest, obstinate Juchi, remained aloof.

The kagan's second son, Jagatai, the ruler of Maveran-Nahr, who had always been in conflict with his elder brother Juchi, said during the family council:

"Juchi has come to love the land of the Kipchaks more than his own native heartland. There in Khorezm he does not allow the Mongols to so much as raise a hand against the Kipchaks. Juchi openly says these shameless words, 'Old Jenghiz has lost his mind, otherwise he wouldn't have plundered so many lands and ruthlessly exterminated so many peoples.' Juchi wants to kill our father during a hunt and make a pact of friendship with the Muslims, breaking away from the Mongol native horde."

At this Jenghiz Khan was filled with rage and sent his brother Utchigin and other trustworthy men with an order that Juchi come to his father at once. "If he refuses to come and stays in Khorezm," Jenghiz Khan whispered into Utchigin's ear, "then strike him without a word and kill him without reproach!"

Juchi sent his father a reply that he was unable to leave due to illness, and stayed in the steppe among the Kipchaks. But the trustworthy men wrote to Jenghiz Khan that Khan Juchi was well, went out on battues often, and that they were therefore remaining on hand to carry out the great kagan's secret order.

Jagatai left to go back to Samarkand to rule his land, and at the beginning of the Year of the Dog (1226) Jenghiz Khan, along with his two favorite sons Ugedei and Tule, led his army against the Tanguts and reached a place called Ongon-Talan-Khudun. Here he had a terrible dream and began talking about the imminence of death.

He sent for his sons, who were in a different division. Ugedei and Tule arrived the next day at dawn. When they had had their fill of food, Jenghiz Khan said to the other persons present in the yurt, "I must hold secret council with my sons. I wish to speak to them about our cares in complete privacy. All of you, be gone."

When all the khans and other people had gone, Jenghiz Khan sat his two sons down beside him. First he gave them advice concerning life and the governing of a state, then he said:

"Remember everything well, my children! Know that, contrary to my expectations, the time of my last campaign has arrived. With the help of the Mongols' patron, the god of war Sulde, I have conquered for you, my sons, a kingdom of such extraordinary breadth that from its hub it is one year's journey to any of its borders. Now I tell you my final behest. Always destroy your enemies and exalt your friends. In order to do this you must always be of one opinion and act as one. Then your lives will be easy and filled with pleasures and you will enjoy your reign. My successor, as I have already indicated, is to be Ugedei. After me he must be proclaimed a great kagan and raised on the white mat of honor. Stand firm and formidable at the head of the entire state and the Mongol people, and do not dare distort or fail to obey my *Yasa* after I am dead. What a pity that my sons Juchi and Jagatai are not here now. What a great pity! Do not allow them to distort my will once I am gone, or fight among themselves and spread fatal discord in the kingdom! Though every man wishes to die at home, I shall set out on one final campaign, that I might die an honorable death as befitting a warrior. You may take your leave."

After this Jenghiz Khan moved on with his army. Along the way the rulers of tribes and cities came one after another to proclaim their obedience. One khan appeared with a platter of large pearls and said, "We submit to you!" But the great kagan, sensing that his end was near, paid no attention to the pearls and ordered them scattered in the steppe before the army. All the warriors rushed to gather the pearls, but many were lost in the dust, so that people later searched for and found them here.

"Every day is more precious to me now than platters of pearls," said Jenghiz Khan, full of anxiety and cares.

The Tangut khan sent messengers to Jenghiz Khan. He did not receive them, so the Tangut emissaries conveyed their message to the kagan's great counselor Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai:

"Our khan has rebelled against the great kagan several times, after which the Mongols always invaded our country, killed our people and plundered our cities. There is no point in resistance. We have come to the service of Jenghiz Khan, we ask for a peaceful agreement and mutual vows."

Yeh-lü Ch'un-ts'ai answered the emissaries, "The great kagan is ill. Let the khan of the Tanguts wait until Jenghiz Khan is well again."

Jenghiz Khan's illness grew worse with every day; he saw his end with clarity and issued the following command:

"When I die, do not reveal my death in any way. Do not weep or wail, so that news of my death should not give our enemies reason to take heart or rejoice. When the khan and the Tangut inhabitants come through the fortress gates with gifts, pounce on them and slay them!"

The great kagan lay on nine folded white felt mats. Under his head was a suede saddle pillow, a dark sable spread covered his legs.

His body, long and wasted, seemed incredibly heavy, and it was difficult for him, who had shaken the world, to move or raise his head.

As he lay there on his side he became aware of a shrill sound like the squeak of a mouse every time he took a breath. For a long time he could not figure out where the mouse was. Then at last he concluded that the mouse was squeaking inside his chest, that when he stopped breathing the mouse was quiet, and that the mouse was in fact his ailment.

When he rolled over on his back he could see above him the top opening of the yurt, much like a wheel. Clouds floated slowly by, and once he noticed a barely visible flock of cranes soar by high in the sky. He could make out their faraway cries, beckoning to new, mysterious lands.

The kagan recalled how he had wanted to go to the

Last Sea, but by the time he had reached the Indian border, he could no longer bear the heat, and his entire body had become covered with an itchy rash; then he had turned the army back toward the cool Mongol steppes.

Now, weak and helpless, he was dying in a cold Tangut valley between purple mountains, where the water in cups turned to ice each night. He was losing what little strength he had left, while the medicine men were deceiving him or were unable to find the herb that would help him mount his steed again and race across the steppe after long-horned deer or yellow, unruly *kulans*¹... Kulans? And where was his beauty, the unruly Kulan-Khatun?.. She was no more!.. So, the Chinese sage had been right — there was no means of attaining immortality!..

The kagan whispered, moving his dry lips with difficulty:

"I never saw such anguish when I was gathering the multitudes of the blue Mongol steppes beneath my palm... It was hard then, so hard that the saddle straps were stretched, the iron stirrups broken... But now my suffering is without measure... It is true what our elders say, 'A rock has not skin, a man has not eternity!'"²

Jenghiz Khan fell into a troubled sleep; the mouse continued to squeak ever louder, he felt a piercing pain in his side, and his breathing faltered.

When the kagan came to, the Chinaman Yeh-lü Ch'uts'ai was kneeling at his feet. This wise counselor, as tall and thin as Jenghiz Khan, stared fixedly at the ailing man.

The kagan said, "What ... good ... and what ... bad..."

"Your interpreter Mahmud-Yalvach has arrived from the land of Bukhara. He says that there —"

The kagan made a gesture of impatience with his hand, and the Chinaman fell silent.

"I am asking," Jenghiz Khan whispered, "what good ... and what bad ... have I done to life?"

Yeh-lü Ch'uts'ai grew pensive. What could he answer this man who was departing from life? Before him suddenly passed an array of images... He saw the blue plains and mountains of Asia, cut by rivers darkened by blood and tears... He recalled the ruins of cities, where

¹A perissodactyl of the horse family.

²The Mongol chronicle *Altan Tobchi*.

the severed and bloated bodies of old men and children and youths in their prime lay heaped upon charred walls, while from afar came the drone of Mongols plundering the city and their unforgettable cries as they slaughtered weeping civilians, "It is willed by the *Yasa*! It is willed by Jenghiz Khan..."

The horrid stench of rotting corpses had driven the last survivors from the ruins, and they had found refuge in marshes, in shelters of branches, fearing every moment the Mongols' return and the noose of their lassoes that would lead them off into agonizing slavery... One picture flashed before him with particular clarity: near the walls of demolished Samarkand, a large, emaciated camel lay on its back, its long dry legs sprawled; life was still smouldering in its horror-filled eyes. Several men, wasted from hunger, pushed each other away with arms blood-stained to the elbows, pulling the camel's innards from a gaping hole in its belly and frantically stuffing them into their mouths... The long bony legs and withered arms of the "tremor of the universe" lying mutely now before Yen-lü Ch'u-ts'ai resembled the camel's, and the same terror of death flashed in his half-closed eyes. And similarly did everyone crowd around his body, pushing each other away — heirs trying to grab a piece of the great, blood-soaked inheritance...

"You mean ... you can't ... recall?.. Tell me!"

Yeh-lü Ch'u-ts'ai said in a whisper, "In your life you have done many great, remarkable and terrible deeds. But only he who writes the book about your campaigns, deeds and words can enumerate them veraciously..."

"We command you ... to summon ... knowledgeable men ... to write ... legends ... of my campaigns ... deeds ... and words..."

"It shall be done."¹

All was quiet inside the yurt. The fire crackled from time to time, or a gust of wind, entering through the ceiling, swirled the blue smoke over the fire burning on

¹After Jenghiz Khan's death, official chronicles about his life and campaigns were written in Mongolian, Chinese and Persian based on accounts by eye-witnesses. All of them exalt Jenghiz Khan and the Mongol massacres, distorting the true picture of events. Only the Persian court chronicler Rashid al-Din, the Arab chronicler Ibn al-Athir and a few other wrote accurate accounts.

dry wormwood and heather. With a wheeze Jenghiz Khan began again:

"What is ... the best ... of all ... I ... have done?"

In an effort to comfort the dying man, Yeh-lü Ch'uts'ai said, "The finest of your deeds are your *Yasa* laws. By conscientiously following these laws, your descendents shall rule the universe for ten thousand years."¹

"True! Then ... there shall ... be ... calm ... graveyards ... in the barren steppes ... thick grass ... will grow ... and between ... the barrows ... Mongol steeds ... alone ... shall graze..."

And after a moment's silence the kagan added, "And unruly ... kulans..."

Jenghiz Khan lay motionless, his eyes closed, his nose sharp, his temples hollow.

Mahmud-Yalvach, a Chinese physician and the head shaman entered noiselessly. Falling to their knees at the kagan's feet, they froze, waiting for him to come to and begin speaking. The kagan opened his eyes, and his gaze rested on Mahmud-Yalvach.

"How does my son ... Jagatai ... rule ... the western territory?"

Mahmud-Yalvach, handsome and smart in a red robe and a snow-white turban, folded his hands on his large belly and bowed to the ground.

"Your valorous son Jagatai Khan and all the Mongol warriors, and all the subjugated peoples in his territory on the banks of the Saihun and Zeravshan pray to Allah for your health and wish you to reign many years."

"And how does ... my ... eldest son ... Juchi Khan ... rule ... the northern peoples?"

Mahmud-Yalvach covered his face with his hands. According to Mongol custom, in discussing the death of a beloved person it is indecent to mention the ordinary name of the deceased, who has already become a holy shadow; it is essential to speak allegorically, replacing his name with other words conveying reverence. Therefore Mahmud-Yalvach began in a round-about way:

"He who received your order to rule the northern

¹The Mongols were routed from China in 1368, 141 years after Jenghiz Khan's death in 1227, and crushed by Russian warriors at the battle on the field of Kulikovo in 1380, 153 years after this event.

peoples announced to the beks that he was preparing a great campaign..."

"Against me?"

"No, my great kagan! Their spear tips were pointed west, in the direction of the Bulgars, Kipchaks, Saxons and Uruses. But the campaign could not take place, and all the warriors dispersed and went back to their pasture lands. Like a bolt from the blue, a great misfortune came crashing down on one and all!"

"Explain!"

"A great hunt was organized in the steppe for the khan's family. Five thousand nukers spread out for a battue across the steppe and drove boars and wolves and a few tigers from the reeds. And another five thousand warriors drove saigas and gazelles and wild horses from far away on the steppe. When the campfires flared that evening after the hunt and the feasting was to begin, the nukers could not find him who emerged unscathed after the most terrible battles. They looked and looked for him, and at last they saw him, but in what a state! He lay alone on the steppe, still alive, not a drop of blood on him, but he could not utter a single word; he merely stared with comprehending eyes, full of wrath..."

"Don't tell me ... he ... is dead..."

"He has died, that warrior near and dear to you, shrouded in the glory of victories. Unknown villains broke his spine."

Jenghiz Khan's face twisted. His hands clenched the sable spread. He whispered, "Utchigin was too hasty... A great warrior and experienced commander is no more ... and there is no one to replace him! Who is now the ruler of Khorezm?"

"Your young grandson, Khan Batu, under the guidance of his wise mother. She summoned the nukers and together with the boy they climbed a barrow. Batu Khan sat astride his father's bay fighter horse. The hot-tempered boy cried to the nukers: 'Listen, warriors, victors of four sides of the world! Your swords have gone rusty! Whet them on black stone! I shall lead you west across the great river Itil. We shall sweep like a storm over the lands of cowardly peoples, and I shall extend the kingdom of my grandfather Jenghiz Khan to the farthest reaches of the universe... And I also swear that I will find and boil

alive the villains who killed my father!’ ”

Jenghiz Khan, his face dark and unsightly, his eyes roaming feverishly, propped himself up on his elbow, and, wheezing, forced out the words:

“How good to be young ... even with shackles on your neck ... when victories gleam up ahead... But Batu is still a boy... He will make mistakes ... he too will be killed! We order ... that there should always be an advisor ... at Batu’s side ... my most trusted Sabutai Bahadar ... the cautious leopard with the gnawed-off paw... He will guard him and teach him to fight... Batu will carry on my victories ... and the Mongol arm ... shall extend over the universe...”

Jenghiz Khan fell on his side. His left eye screwed up, and his right eye, still bright and ominous, continued to watch those present.

Eyes lowered, everyone remained silent. And the words of the poet¹ were recalled:

*In impotence the four men sat
By the commander so mighty and accustomed to
victory.
They were a doctor, a shaman, a dervish and
astrologer.
And with them they had medicines and ancient
spells,
Talismans and horoscopes —
But not one of them could provide any recovery
at all.*

A horse, standing near the tent, neighed in the silence. With a shudder everyone glanced at the kagan — his right eye, having lost its glimmer, faded.

Jenghiz Khan had been transporting a coffin with him for some time already. It was hewed of a single oak block and lined inside with gold. That night, in secret, his sons placed the coffin in the middle of the yellow tent. They laid Jenghiz Khan in it, dressed in fighting mail. His hands, folded on his chest, clenched the hilt of a whetted sword. His black helmet of burnished steel set off his pale, harsh face with its drawn lids. A bow and arrows,

¹Khosrevani (10th century).

a knife, flint and a gold cup for drinking were lain along either side of the coffin.

In keeping with the kagan's order, the commanders did not reveal the secret of his death and continued the siege of the principal Tangut city. When the Tanguts came through the gates bearing gifts of honor and offering peace, the Mongols attacked them, slaughtered them all, then burst into the city and laid it to waste.

Shrouding the coffin of Jenghiz Khan in white felt cloth and mounting it on a two-wheeled cart with twelve bulls in harness, the Mongols started back. So that no one would speak of the death of the ruler of nations inopportunely, until they reached the Native Horde the warriors killed every creature they met along the way, man and beast alike, with the words:

"Go to the kingdom beyond the clouds! Serve our sacred ruler there zealously!"

During the national mourning, Jenghiz Khan's famed warrior, the conqueror of the Merkits, Chinese, Kipchaks, Persians, Georgians, Alans and Uruses, the commander Chepe Noyon announced:

"Once, 'he who built our kingdom' was hunting on the mountain Burkhan-Khaldun. He rested beneath an old tree on a barren spot of the mountain slope. 'He who is no more' liked this wild place and the tall slender cedar that reached beyond the clouds. And I heard these words, 'This spot is good as a pasture for wild deer and suitable for my last resting place. Remember this tree.' "

The kagan's commanders, in accordance with this order, found the specified spot on the mountain side where the extraordinarily tall cedar grew. The coffin with Jenghiz Khan's body was lowered into the ground beneath it.

With time such a dense and wild forest grew up around the grave that it became impossible to penetrate it and find the burial spot, so that even the old guards of this protected place could not point out the road to it.

EPILOGUE

Chapter One

THE MONGOLS PASSED HERE

Hail, you snow-capped mounts!
Have you seen how I was made slave to the impious?
How I trudged with hands bound,
Shielding my head from the blows of the whip!
No one is moved by my tears.
The mountains alone shudder at them.

From the song of a slave from Khiva

Along the wide road that led east from the great river Jaihun, where wealthy caravans had passed for centuries, all life came to a halt immediately following the Mongol invasion. Roadside shops and inns were abandoned, and they now stood in disrepair without gates or doors, which the warriors had torn off for firewood. The great gardens withered, as there was no one to clear the gutters to let the water pass.

The sullen young rider in a foreign cloak created the impression of something strange and uncommon as he rode alone along the dusty trail, where human bones gnawed by jackals lay strewn about in all directions. A lean black horse of Arabian blood beat a measured tattoo with its hooves, the rider urging it on with an occasional whistle.

"What a ghostly desert! Not a man, nor a camel, nor a dog in sight!" the rider sighed. "All day long only two wolves have leisurely crossed the road as if they owned this silent flatland that is like an endless graveyard... If everything goes on this way, my untiring steed along with its master will soon lie down forever alongside these white skulls that bear the traces of the dreaded Mongol blades."

A dark stirring heap up ahead caught the attention of horse and rider. The former snorted and pricked up its ears. The horseman drew up nearer. Several large sombre-looking vultures were crowding over their find, lying in the middle of the dusty, sun-lit road.

The rider gave a whistle. Awkwardly flapping their enormous wings, the vultures took to the air and immediately descended again on some nearby knolls. Between the fresh grooves of wagon wheels on the road, lay a girl in tattered Turkmen dress, her body strangely contorted, as if in some convulsive movement. The vultures had already mutilated her face, though it still retained its delicate features.

"The Mongols' doing once again! They snatch up children, keep them without care, then discard them once they have had their fun with them..."

The whip cracked and the horse galloped off. Beyond a bend in the road, the rider caught sight of a group of Mongols. Two carts on high, squeaky wheels, overloaded with plundered goods and chattels, moved slowly up ahead. Atop the mound of goods in either cart sat a Mongol woman in a man's fox-fur hat and sheepskin coat, shouting monotonously at the harnessed bulls, trudging along indifferently in a cloud of dust.

Three half-naked emaciated prisoners with hands bound behind their backs, and a woman, swaying with fatigue, hobbled along behind the carts. A large shaggy dog trotted behind them, its tongue hanging out. A Mongol boy of about seven with two braids over his ears, drove the prisoners as would a herdsman urging on slow-moving cows.

"*Uragsh, uragsh, muu!* (Move, move, stupid!)" cried the boy and whipped each in turn with a switch. He was dressed in a quilted robe, drawn at the waste, taken off a grown-up; he wore large boots which he had bound tightly with straps beneath the knees to keep them from slipping off. The sense of having been entrusted with a serious job made the boy drive the woman with especial vigor, while she continued to trudge along only thanks to a rope that stretched from the cart. Her bony back, covered with purple scars could be seen through slits in her yellow dress. The woman pleaded:

"Let me go! I'll come back! My daughter Khabiche

was left there ... I'll carry her myself!.."

"Ha! What do you want with a daughter?" interjected an old Mongol who appeared out of a cloud of dust on a grey horse. "She's barely moving on the rope herself, and she brags that she'll carry another nag besides!.."

The old man gave the woman a blow with his whip. She lurched forward and fell. The rope to which she was tied grew taut and dragged the prisoner along. The Mongol woman shouted from the cart:

"You greedy old dog! If it were a lame sheep I'd take it on my lap — at least it would be good for its meat and skin. But what profit will this animal bring us? Her daughter already croaked, and now she's gone down too. And we have oh so far yet to trudge till we reach our native Kerulen!.. Leave her!"

"She won't croak! She's tough!" rasped the old man in his wrath. "This carrion and these three lads as well — they'll all make it to our yurt. Our neighbors are driving home twenty slaves each, and we can't even bring four? Hey you swine, move! *Uragsh, uragsh!*"

The Mongol whipped the woman again, the rope snapped, and the slave was left on the road. The carts moved on. The old man held back his grey horse, clicked his tongue and asked the young rider who had approached:

"Will she survive or not? Buy her from me! I'll sell her cheap, just two gold dinars..."

"She won't live till nightfall! Want two copper dirhams?"

"I'll take 'em! What if you're right and she doesn't make it! Then I won't even get that much..." The Mongol stuffed the two copper coins into the top of his boot and started off at a trot to overtake the carts.

The rider turned off the road, and, without looking back, galloped across the parched field...

Before him in the distance arose some white ruins, queer mounds of debris, old broken walls and a few majestic arches. They still bore colorful Arabic inscriptions. So much art and thought had been invested by the architects who had built these elegant structures, and even greater labor had been exerted by the unknown workers who had molded beautiful palaces and impressive madrasah and slender minarets from large square bricks.

"Just one bale of dry clover and a few loaves,"

muttered the rider, "and then, with just one more day's journey, we would reach the green mountains, where we'd find people and friendly talk around the campfire."

The stone ruins were quite near now. Beneath a massive arch, heavy gates stood agape. The doors were encased in iron, held in place by large plate-like nail heads.

"I know these gates! The dervish Haji Rakhim, the peasant Kurban-Kyzyk and the boy Tugan once passed here. Now Tugan has grown up, become a skilled warrior, but, like a homeless wanderer, he finds neither food nor shelter in noble Bukhara, once blossoming and populous."

The horse's hooves echoed hollowly beneath the dark gates. Up ahead a red fox scurried by, jumped lightly onto a pile of rubbish and disappeared.

The horse stepped gingerly, making its way through the ruins of the dead, muted city. They came to the main square... Majestic buildings had once surrounded this place of noisy popular festivities. Now the square was cluttered with rubbish and the skeleton of a horse shone white in the center. Brown kites soared slowly across the vast turquoise sky, their wings outspread and motionless.

The horse stopped by the stone steps of the mosque. Snorting, it backstepped, pricking up its ears. Before them, on a stone pedestal, an enormous Koran lay open, its pages, warped by the rain, fluttering in the wind.

"By these stone steps, the sullen sovereign of the Mongols, red-bearded Jenghiz Khan, entered the mosque on a sorrel stallion. It was here that he ordered the elders of Bukhara to feed to satiety his flat-faced warriors. Then fires raged on the square, lambs were roasted... You can still make out the traces of fire on the stone tiles..."

Tugan dismounted, spread out his cloak and crumbled up some dry bread. He unbridled the horse and sat down on the steps, holding the end of the reins.

Something stirred behind a pile of rocks. An emaciated woman rose up from behind a brick heap. Wrapped in the tattered remnants of a dress, she approached with an outstretched hand, unable to tear her greedy, burning eyes off the bread crusts.

Tugan gave her a handful. She accepted them with a slow, majestic gesture, as if they were gems, and, moving away, knelt down on the ground. She raised one of the

crusts to her swollen lips, but then jerked her hand away and began breaking them up into equal piles on the stone tile. She carefully licked the crumbs from her hands and shouted:

"Hey, little foxes, hey, little pot-bellies, come here! Don't be afraid! He is one of us, he is kind."

From a black opening between two stone slabs appeared first one, then three small shaggy-haired heads. Making their way through the ruins, clinging to one another, the children slowly approached the woman. Naked and scorched by the sun, they were as thin as skeletons; only their bellies were disproportionately bloated. Two more children crawled out of the hole. They did not even attempt to stand, but crawled up on all fours and sat down, holding their swollen bellies.

The woman slapped the hands of those who reached out for the crusts, and began putting crumbs, one by one, into the children's mouths. As she did she told the rider:

"They rushed in ... those terrible men, wrapped in sheepskin.. They galloped everywhere on small horses and took everything they saw... They killed my husband — he wanted to protect his family... They seized all my children and took them away — I do not know if they are alive or not... The riders dragged me on a lasso, kept me as a slave for the fun of them all. One night I managed to escape, and I made my way here to these ruins... I did not find my house. Only piles of rubbish. Lizards scurry about by day, jackals howl and creep about by night. I found these children abandoned by the Mongols near the city. Together we hunted for food and dug up wild onion roots... Now these children have become my children, and we shall die together, or maybe we'll survive..."

Tugan gave the woman the rest of the bread crusts and, leading his horse by the reins, left the city.

He made his way onward toward Samarkand. He did not meet any caravans along the way. Occasional villagers appeared here and there on the fields. Twice Mongol horsemen galloped by. Then the villagers working in the fields would fall to the ground and crawl away to the gutters. When the cloud of dust accompanying the Mongols had disappeared beyond the hills, the frightened villagers would rise to their feet and go back to digging up the earth.

Chapter Two

WHERE IS NOISY SAMARKAND?

A few days later Tugan stopped on a barren height, furrowed by burial mounds. Before him stretched a green river valley strewn with the ruins of the once glorious Samarkand. Some of the small, flat-roofed houses still stood huddled together, but there was no sign of life in the former capital of Maveran-nahr, where tens of thousands of skilled workmen had once plied their trades.

The fortress walls, broken and worn by the rains, surrounded the central part of the city. A charred segment of the tall mosque, built by the Khorezm Shah Muhammad, and two round towers remained.

A lame beggar approached Tugan and extended a bony hand out from under his rags.

"Give to one forsaken, glorious bek jigiti! May Allah guard you in battle! May He divert the enemy arrow from your brave heart!"

"Where is the city? Where is the glittering capital of sultans and shahs? Where are the pompous merchants and colorful bazaars? Why don't I hear the clank of hammers in the shops?" said Tugan, talking more to himself than to the beggar.

"All of that is no more!" said the beggar. "For the Mongols have passed here! Do you think they would leave anything behind? You ask where the city has gone? Some of the people were slaughtered by merciless horsemen, others were driven away to their distant steppes, the rest fled to the rocky mountains, where many have already perished..."

"Will the refugees roam about for a long time to come?"

"There, beyond the city, up the river a ways, people are gathering little by little and building themselves huts of brushwood and clay. But they live in constant fear: the Mongols could return any day, take anyone they please and haul them away by their lassoes... May Allah preserve you for your generosity!"

"And what are those towers in the middle of the city?"

"Turn your horse away and steer clear of those towers! That is the prison! The Mongol khans have already established a prison in this lifeless city. The Mongol

executioners live near it; they smash the prisoners' heads with iron rods. I'll tell you how it is done..."

Tugan did not listen, but started down the hillside. Making his way through the ruins of the ghost town, Tugan rode up to the fortress, where the two old towers, silent and dismal, loomed. Despondent relatives of the prisoners sat on the ground along the wall. Sentries guarded the door with spears. Saddled horses dozed, tethered to posts.

"Where are you going? Keep away!" barked a sentry.

"I have business with the prison keeper," said Tugan.

"Miss the prison, is that it?"

"Perhaps, if my brother is being held in the tower."

"We've got plenty of bandits in that prison. But they don't stay around long: we take them out onto the square before the moat and give them a whack over the head with an iron rod. Look there, in the moat — maybe you'll find your brother. What was his name?"

"He is a dervish and writes books, Haji Rakhim al-Bagdadi —"

"The crazy long-haired dervish? That one is still alive! We call him *divona* (God's fool). He's been put in for a long time..."

"'Forever and unto death'?"

"I've told you too much as it is... Tie up the horse and go into the yard. You can ask the head of the prison. His house is there. A jug hangs on a hook by the door. Don't forget to put at least six dirhams in it. Then the keeper will hear you out..."

Tugan tied up his horse and walked through the gate. The prison head was standing on the terrace of his house in a red quilted robe and green shoes on bare feet. A gaunt and half-naked cook, clanking an iron chain on his feet, was using a cleaver to chop meat in a wooden bowl for kebab. The tip of the keeper's grey beard, his fingernails and palms were dyed red with henna. He kept swatting the cook on the shoulder with a reed switch and saying, "And more pepper! Don't be lazy! Like that! Now douse it with pomegranate juice!"

Tugan noticed the clay jug hanging by the door and dropped ten copper dirhams into it. The keeper fixed his sullen gaze on Tugan.

"I am a Muslim warrior from the troop of Sabutai Bahadar. With his permission I have come in search of family. Here is my paitza!" Tugan produced a plate with a carved inscription and a picture of a bird, hanging on a cord.

The keeper examined the paitza and returned it to Tugan.

"What has brought you to this house of the forsaken?"

"I am searching for a relative, the dervish Haji Rakhim al-Bagdadi. Have you anyone by that name?"

"May Allah curse him and preserve us, you and me, from doubt and acquaintance with him!"

"Why has he been imprisoned? I knew him as a righteous man."

"Some righteous man! He was imprisoned for indifference toward the holy books, for audacious free-thinking. Death has become his end!.. Fire shall be his last shelter!.. These are his just deserts!"

Tugan thought for a moment and said, "The accusations made against him are harsh, but perhaps you would allow me to ease his fate somehow?"

"Don't waste your efforts in vain! His life was saved only on the demand of Mahmud-Yalvach, the grand vizier of the mighty sovereign of our country, Khan Jagatai. The dervish will not be freed before he has written a book about the life and campaigns of the tremor of the universe, Jenghiz Khan."

"And when Haji Rakhim completes his notes he will be released?"

"Hah! Even if he repents for his sins he will be brought out of prison only to have his tongue and hands cut off before a crowd on the square. That is why the *divona* has been writing the book for two years now, and will go on writing for thirty more, in order to postpone the day of his death."

Tugan said, "Since Haji Rakhim was my benefactor, taught me to read and write Arabic, fed me when I was dying of hunger, I am willing to sacrifice my only gold dinar on deeds pleasing to Allah..." Tugan held up the gold coin. "And you, great keeper, show compassion for one condemned to death and allow me to visit Haji Rakhim."

"Give me the gold dinar and go into the next yard.

There you can admire your crazy *divona* as much as you like.”

Tugan placed the gold coin in the prison head's red-dyed palm and walked through the stone gates.

Chapter Three

IN AN IRON CAGE

At the back of the narrow courtyard was a dark square orifice covered by an iron grate. Something dark potted about there among a heap of rags.

Near the cage a slim figure wrapped in a long black shawl, common to women of the wandering Lyuli tribe, stood huddled against the wall.

Tugan approached cautiously. The woman turned her head. The familiar facial features stunned him: the same golden swarthy face, the same inquisitive brown eyes, only the former carelessness was gone. Casting an intent gaze, the woman looked away... There could be no doubt — it was Bent-Zankija!

Tugan moved closer, peering inside the cage. The ceiling was so low that a prisoner could barely sit inside even if he hunched over. A shaggy mane of black curly hair and intense burning eyes appeared out of the darkness. In spite of the horrible changes in the gaunt face, Tugan could not but recognize it as Haji Rakhim's. The dervish crawled to the bars of the cage and pressed his hairy face to them.

“You have come on time, younger brother of mine!” he rasped. “Come closer, Tugan, and hear my final wishes. They want to let me rot in this cage or cut off my ears and chop me to bits to frighten the crowd... But who can kill a free thought or smother my flaming hatred?... I have written everything my persecutors wanted, but when they read my notes they will burn both them and me on the fire... For unlike them, I did not exalt the red-bearded Jenghiz and did not compose sweet songs of praise to the enslavers of Khorezm, the thick-skinned killers of women and children... I boldly wrote the truth about what my eyes saw... I have done all I could, and now my final day of separation has come. Bury me

beneath an old plane tree on the banks of the Salar. My teacher, Abu Ali ibn-Sina was a great sage, and, hunted, he died in prison on rotted straw... He knew all the secrets of the universe but one — how to escape death!..”

Tugan began in a low voice, “Do you remember what you taught me in the desert when you and I were bound by ropes and the dreaded ‘black horseman’, Kara-Konchar raised his sword to kill us? Was it not you who said then, ‘Do not lose heart, the night is still young!’ Now I say the same to you, ‘Do not despair, for the night has not yet begun!’ ”

Haji Rakhim raised himself quickly, as if strength had returned to him. Tugan went on quietly, in a half-whisper, trying to sound persuasive, “Listen, elder brother of mine, and do as I say. I shall give you three little black balls — you are to swallow them. Then you will become motionless, like a dead man, will stop feeling pain and will have a dream in which you will fly across the mountains to a valley of cool streams and fragrant flowers... Steeds as white as snow graze there and golden birds sing in lovely voices... And there in your dream you shall meet once again the girl you loved at sixteen.”

“And when I awake I shall gnaw these iron bars once more? I do not want such a dream!”

“Wait and listen on! While you are dreaming about the mountain valley, where you shall enjoy untainted oblivion, I will tell the guards that you have died and your body must be buried. Then the guards will open the cage, snag your body with a hook and drag you to the pit for the executed... Endure this, even if you do feel pain — do not cry out or weep! Otherwise they will smash your head with an iron rod... When you are lying in the pit among corpses and at midnight the jackals come creeping along to gnaw at your feet, I will come for you with three warriors. We will wrap you up in a cloak and quickly carry you away beyond the city to a deserted place... There reason will return to you, I will put you on a horse and you will go away to the east or the west, where you will start a new life...”

“Yes, you are right: the night is still young!.. I am ready to leave for the valley of white steeds! Give me the medicinal balls, quickly!” And Haji Rakhim put out his hand, black and rough like a kite’s claw.

Tugan took three little balls from a colorful sack and handed them to Haji Rakhim, who swallowed them without hesitation. He began to mutter something, which grew increasingly quiet and incomprehensible, swayed and fell over on his side...

A guard with a spear walked up to the cage.

"My master orders you to leave the criminal's cage!"

"The prisoner no longer requires the mercy of your strict master: he is dead!"

The guard distrustingly stuck his spear into the cage and jabbed the prostrate dervish.

"He doesn't cry out? He doesn't move? Indeed, he has died!.. Now the body of the crazy *divona* will be thrown into the pit... If you wish to bury him, make haste to do it tonight. By morning the dogs and jackals will have chewed the dead man so that you won't even find his bones to gather... Thank you for your generosity! We all must die some day!.."

Chapter Four

THE LAST PAGE OF THE BOOK

The patient and persistent will see a favorable end to his undertaking.

Haji Rakhim

Tugan and Bent-Zankija walked side by side along the deserted streets of the ruined city. Tugan led his horse by the reins. The sound of its hooves echoed hollowly off the walls of the abandoned structures. Both recalled the faraway days of their youth, spent in noisy Gurganj, in the home of old Mirza-Yusuf, killed in the flood.

"All these long years of my wandering I thought of you, Bent-Zankija!"

"And now once again the friend of your youth is before you... I too have seen the flash of lightning and heard the claps of thunder that shook our whole earth... But where mighty oaks and plane trees fall in a furious storm, sometimes a tiny mouse is saved — so have I survived!"

“Tell me what befell you during these terrible years?”

“Listen to all that happened. When the Mongols seized me in Bukhara and forced me to sing their fierce sovereign sad songs about the death of Khorezm, he praised me and ordered me to remain with his traveling chorus of Chinese singers... With them I followed that exterminator of peoples wherever he went. Once Jenghiz Khan began to complain of pain in his eyes, that instead of one moon, two floated before him, and that instead of one gazelle he saw three on the steppe at once. He thought that evil spirits were playing tricks on him. The Mongol shamans prayed and danced before Jenghiz Khan, but they were unable to drive away the evil spirits. The doctors were afraid to touch him or look into his horror-inspiring eyes. However, an old Arab medicine man by the name of Zin-Zaban, who had come to Jenghiz Khan's camp, boldly set about treating the ‘tremor of the universe’. And indeed, he soon brought Jenghiz Khan relief. The fierce sovereign was pleased and asked what reward he would like. The old man asked not for jewels, but merely pointed at a singer in the women's chorus, and that singer was I! Jenghiz Khan ordered me given to Zin-Zaban. The old man locked me in the *enderun*¹, where I sang about the youth's black curls and the mole on his cheek. He heard it and beat me with a patterned strap. I began singing about the warrior who had forgotten how to smile. The old man again took to reforming me with a leather strap. Then I ran away and the women of the wandering tribe despised by us, the fire-worshipping Lyuli, hid me in their tents. I went about shrouded like they in a black shawl, and no one betrayed me... But to his own misfortune, the old Zin-Zaban went to the fierce Jenghiz Khan to lodge a complaint against me, beseeching him to send his warriors out to find me... The Mongol sovereign grew so furious that everyone around fell to the ground, hiding their faces in their hands... ‘How could you have dared let my gift slip away?’ roared Jenghiz Khan. ‘Why were you incapable of taming your wife? A man who is not obeyed by his wife does not dare live in my land! Seize him!’ And the poor old man was seized by the executioners, who chopped off his wise grey head

¹*Enderun* — the part of a dwelling where women were kept.

then and there. 'What a terrible outcome!'¹ From that time on I have been living with the Lyuli tribe. When I learned that Haji Rakhim was being held in that cage, I began bringing him bread, nuts and grapes... I helped him write..."

"You, yourself persecuted, helped him?"

"Every three days I would come to the prison and give Haji Rakhim a few sheets of blank paper, while he would furtively pass me the pages of his memoirs written during those three days. I would copy the pages over back in my tent, then return them to Haji Rakhim, and three days later I would again receive new pages of the tale of the Mongol invasion of Khorezm... In this way, simultaneously with the book that Haji Rakhim wrote in the cage, I accumulated the pages of an identical second book, rewritten in my hand. Blessed be the memory of Mirza-Yusuf, who taught me how to write!"

"You have done a great thing," said Tugan. "If his persecutors burn Haji Rakhim's notes, we shall have a second copy of them! And our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will read Haji Rakhim's tale about the crimes of Jenghiz Khan."

They approached the bank of a swift cloudy river. Here stood the charred woolen tents of the Lyuli tribe.

At the foot of an old plane tree, Bent-Zankija placed a stack of paper on a small rug scrap. The bright moon, which had risen over the ruins of Samarkand, illuminated the yellow pages, where the tale of the persecuted wanderer was set forth in even lines.

Bent-Zankija knelt down on the rug and said as she turned the pages, "Haji Rakhim grew extremely weak, locked in that forever cold and dank cage, but he never lost heart, as if he were warmed by his own burning thoughts... He wrote with difficulty... Look at how crooked and uneven are the letters of these lines! Listen to what Haji Rakhim wrote on the last page..."

Bent-Zankija took a sheet of paper and began reading: " '...My worn reed pen has written the final lines of the tale of the merciless Mongols' raid on the blossoming valleys of our homeland... The composer of this book in his unending diligence would have liked to say a great

¹A common expression in Arabic tales, taken from the Koran.

deal more about those cowardly men of Khorezm who did not take it upon themselves to enter into selfless battle with the cruel murderer of peaceful tribes, the ferocious Jenghiz Khan...

“‘...Had all those of Khorezm raised the sword of wrath with conviction and unity, sparing not themselves, had they charged the enemies of their homeland, the arrogant Mongols and their red-bearded sovereign would not have lasted but half a year in Khorezm, and would have vanished forever into their faraway steppes...

“‘...The Mongols triumphed more as a result of discord and compliance on the part of their foe than by the strength of their curved blades... The brave Jelal ed-Din showed that he was capable of crushing the Mongol hordes with but a small detachment of daring jigits...

“‘...But the reed pen slips from my numbed fingers... The strength of the wandering dervish wanes, while the days race on, bringing ever nearer the day of atonement... I can scribble but a few lines from the poet’s¹ verse:

*Like the springtime rain,
And the autumn wind
Vanished has my youth!
I have been detained in this life,
While the caravan leader
Has the camels loaded down
And hastens to be on his way...*

“‘...I shall say to my unknown reader in parting:

“‘There is nothing firmer nor more ardent than my faith in the victory of the shackled thinker over the dull-minded executioner, the victory of the oppressed laborer over the fierce tyrant, the victory of knowledge over falsehood!.. I know that there will come better times, when truth, care for the individual and freedom will lead our homeland to universal happiness and light!.. This shall come, this shall be!’ ”

Bent-Zankija put her dark slender finger with three silver rings to her lips, thought for a moment, furrowing her curved brows, carefully stacked the pages of writing

¹Khosrevani (10th century).

and wrapped them in a piece of colorful cloth. She lifted her shining black eyes to Tugan and said in a whisper:

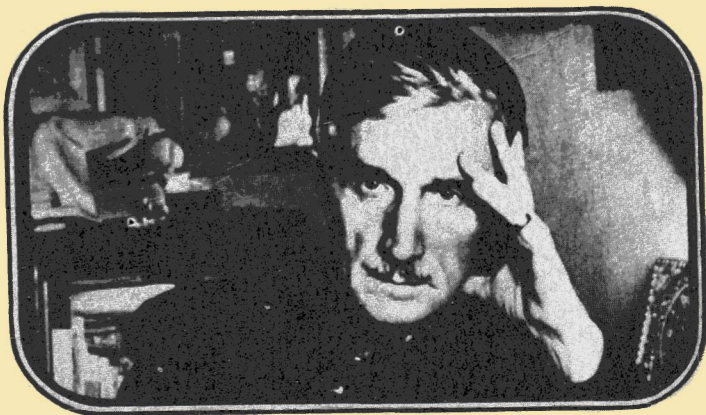
“And now I shall summon three brave youths from the Lyuli tribe... You will go to the moat of the executed and rescue Haji Rakhim. For the night is still young! We shall save him!”

THE END

Vassili
YAN

A Novel

JENGHIZ KHAN



The Soviet writer Vassili Yan (1874-1954) was a versatile man; in fact, he was an accomplished traveller, journalist, economist, schoolteacher, editor, playwright, and stage director, and, finally, the author of stories and historical novels. One of his greatest passions was the study of the Orient. This novel about Jenghiz Khan, published in 1939, was a tremendous success with readers. The novel describes Jenghiz Khan's invasion of Central Asia, the extermination of a million human beings, and the barbarian destruction of centres of highly developed culture. The novel concludes with the Khan's hordes reaching the steppe along the Dnieper and the first encounters between the Mongol invaders and Russian warriors. The book was awarded the State Prize of the USSR.

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